SKALDENLAND

a novel

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Skaldenland

is dedicated to the best family ever

Jonathan and Andrea; Joanne and Steve

Without whom this Work could never have been produced.

and

June and Colin

Without whom this Author could never have been produced.

Find your song and sing it.

“The Red King is dreaming now,’ said Tweedledee. “And what do you think he’s dreaming about?’

Alice said, “Nobody can guess that.”

“Why, about you!’ Tweedledee exclaimed, clapping his hands triumphantly. “And if he left off dreaming about you, where do you suppose you’d be?”

“Where I am now, of course,” said Alice.

“Not you!” Tweedledee retorted contemptuously. “You’d be nowhere. Why, you’re only a sort of thing in his dream!”

Lewis Carroll, Alice Through the Looking Glass

“What happens after heaven, earth and the whole world is ended, and the gods are all dead, and all the great warriors, and all humankind? Everyone must live throughout all time in some world or another.”

Völuspá: a Viking prophecy, c.1000AD

“Why do we only remember the past?”

Stephen Hawking, A Brief History of Time

From the Journal of Brun Jordan

At the place where the world begins, the fjord of the ice-giants, a girl stands with her back against the highest cliff and shields her eyes from the bitter glare of the sun.

The rock pressing against her shoulders is granite; cold and grey; cracked by endless summer and winter until it resembles the seamed skin of an old man. The sky is blue within endless blue, ice-white where the land lifts in jagged shapes to tear its edges with gorse-tipped claws. Beneath her sandalled feet, the ground shelves away to a sheer drop, a jagged mouth whose throat is a mystery cloaked in dazzling spray. Water pours into the crevasse, twin streams split by a stone blade; a river sundered, screaming distantly at the thrilling tragedy of its own divorce.

The girl's name is Freya. In the fierce sun her pale skin and hair glow so she almost seems to be made of sky. Outwardly she is just like any other girl of fifteen summers. Inside, where it matters most, she is far, far older. She stands with her back to the cliff and her face to tomorrow, looking both outward and inward. Out across the fields of battle drenched in blood and ice; inward across a landscape of memories, moments which have shaped her life and brought her to now; to this moment and this place.

Today she will walk the fields of battle. Today she will choose the men who will die.

One of them will be the man she loves.

Chapter 1

‘Hey sis. When was the last time you saw the moon?’

Chad Jordan, casually inverted, hung by his knees from the apple tree, long arms and hair scraping summer sunflowers.

‘For heavens’ sake Chad, where’s your focus?’

Brun Jordan, eyes tight shut in a rapture of composition, perched cross-legged in a striped cloth deckchair, notebook and pen held loosely between nimble fingers. The afternoon hung long shadows on her short face.

‘I need constructive feedback, not spurious astronomy.’

‘Can’t we do both?’

His voice, friendly yet probing.

‘No!’

‘My question requires less thought. Truck out an answer and we can get on with the main event.’

Brun, sighing.

‘I don’t know. Last night.’

‘New moon. And the night before. And tomorrow.’

‘Well then... how about... hm, no, there were clouds. Well, there’s last Wednesday... Yes. Dad’s barbie. What about then?’

‘Hm. Charred steaks and limp salad. We had to use the garden lights. Try again.’

‘Well, I don’t know! You tell me.’

‘That’s just it. I can’t remember. Puzzle isn’t it?’

‘Chad, this is all very interesting but honestly it’s my holiday too. I’m trying to write. I need feedback. And you promised.’

‘Do all the great wordsmiths have so little regard for life’s rich pageant of mysteries, I wonder?’

‘You know what? Forget it. Just go away.’

Brun, acknowledging defeat, picked up her pen.

‘ “Screaming distantly at the thrilling tragedy of its own divorce...” ’

Chad, matching his words to her pen strokes.

‘Mm mmm... choice phrasing, I’d say.’

‘Stop reading over my shoulder. And do please be serious. This is my novel we’re talking about.’

Brun, pensive, chewed the end of the pen.

‘Do you think it’s pretentious then?’

Chad, the human pendulum, thought this over while swinging gently back and forth.

‘I believe I’ll take the Fifth.’

‘Thanks for nothing!’

‘What else are brothers for. For that matter, what else are libraries for?’

Chad, shifting his grip.

‘She going to throw herself off the cliff then, your lovelorn heroine?’

Brun considered.

‘Who says she’s lovelorn?’

‘You do.’

Chad contorted his body, reaching up to grab the branch, tucking in his legs and pulling them through the loop made by his body and the branch, hanging by his hands.

‘I mean, let’s face it, you are and she’s you isn’t she? Why else give her your - ouch! Your name?’

Chad finished his sentence sitting on the ground because the strength in his arms had given out at last. Apple blossom dusted his long hair and T-shirt.

‘Freya is my middle name so it doesn’t really count.’

Brun, smoothing her own, shorter, darker hair.

‘And for your information I’m not any kind of lovelorn.’

A bark of laughter from Chad.

‘You can tell that to the marines!’

Brun, uncoiling from the deckchair, reached out with a slow hand to flick blossom from her brother’s hair.

‘It’s like snow. Summer snow.’

‘And don’t change the subject.’

Chad, bouncing to his feet.

‘Changing the subject is the prerogative of an enquiring mind.’

‘That’d be alright if you had one.’

‘Don’t be sarcastic. It’s not respectful. And don’t use other people’s colloquialisms. It’s the first sign of a lazy mind.’

‘Next you’ll be telling me that context is paramount and double negatives redundant.’

‘It is. They are. Listen!’

Chimes, drifting softly across the garden’s white stone walls.

‘I’ll tell you something about context.’

Chad, head up, sniffing the air.

‘I see me in juxtaposition - close juxtaposition, mind - to a 99 Cone with chocolate and strawberry sauce, and extra nuts.’

‘You’ll be sick. Anyway that’s not the ice-cream van.’

‘Just because it’s your turn to fork out.’

‘No, seriously, it’s nothing to do with that. The ice cream van has a jingle. That’s a melody. Can’t you tell the difference?’

‘Jingle, melody; same thing, sis, surely?’

‘Alright, hum it then.’

‘Don’t be daft.’

‘No, go on then, if you don’t believe me. Jingles are easy to remember. Cover your ears and hum it.’

‘Alright I will.’

His voice, nails on a blackboard.

‘There. Perfect pitch!’

‘Not like that, you can hear it. Like this.’

Her hands taking his, pressing against his ears; the cupped rush of ocean wind.

‘Wait.’

Her lips, moving silently.

‘Wait... now try.’

‘Alright, I... blow me, I can’t remember it.’

‘You see?’

Her hands, falling from his, shaped the air.

‘A melody is more complex. More sophisticated. And we don’t have the harmonic context.’

‘Do what?’

‘Oh don’t be obtuse! What I mean is, we haven’t heard enough of the tune to remember it. And for heaven’s sake take your hands away from your ears. I’m trying to be serious.’

‘No, really?’

‘Do shut up for a minute. I’m sure I’ve heard that melody before.’

‘Now you’re being paranoid. Anyway. I’ve never heard it before. It sounds classical.’

‘Well I’m sure I have heard it before. Whenever I’ve been writing, in fact. Don’t you think that’s strange?’

The music, drifting, sycamore notes twisting eerily across the garden with the apple blossom.

‘I don’t know. Maybe you’re right. It does seem to get inside your head, doesn’t it?’

‘Finally, the boy sees sense.’

‘What is it then, if it’s not the ice cream van?’

‘How should I know?’

‘You’re the one taking her exams a year early. What else could it be?’

The sun, shifting, struck sparks from thoughtfully narrowed eyes.

‘Sirens.’

Her voice, summer pollen, a slow drift.

‘Police or ambulance?’

‘More like The Old Man And The Sea.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Literary reference.’

‘Of course. Sorry I thinked.’

‘Chad!’

‘Thunked, I mean.’

‘Ssshhhh!’

‘What?’

Her face, turning, tracked the sound.

‘It’s going away.’

‘Hey!’

Chad, shouting suddenly.

‘Wait! Don’t go! We want a job lot of Dark and Golden!’

‘Chad! For heaven’s sake!’

‘Or an Oyster with nuts at least!’

Running, he vaulted the stone wall. Apple blossom swirled in his wake. Feet thumped on the pavement.

‘Blow me. I thought he’d be right here.’

‘He should be right there.’

Brun, using her elbows to lever herself onto the wall.

‘Can’t you see anything?’

‘Some dog making free with the lamp-post.’

Chad, rubbing the side of his nose.

‘Dunno how he expects to sell any ice-cream if he shifts like that.’

‘I told you: it’s not a van.’

Scrape of stone on knees and palms. Butterflies. The road, hot under sandalled feet; empty of traffic in both directions.

‘It’s getting fainter.'

‘Only one thing to do then.’

And they were off, rats to the Piper, running breathless in the heat; a rain of feet squishing against sun-sticky tarmac, downhill towards town.

‘Get a move on or we’ll lose him!’

‘There! Go left!’

‘No, right! Cut across the green! The churchyard!’

‘I’m cutting, I’m cutting!’

A wall. Scrape of elbow and knee. Gravestones; grey monoliths, moss-chalked with time’s graffiti. Another wall. A bus stop. Curious eyes; a murder of crows, jet wings beating anvil sky.

‘Wait!’

Her voice, breathless.

‘What?’

Drifting haze of sound, traffic toiling up past the bus station from the high street.

‘I can’t make it out any more.’

Unsuccessfully, she sifted the small town backwash for clues.

‘Can you hear anything?’

Chad, ear cocked, listening carefully.

‘I don’t know. The traffic... I don’t think so.’

‘We’ve lost him then.’ Disappointment.

‘Look, let’s take a breather. We must have run half a mile. It’s too hot and I’m just about done in. Why don’t we find a cafe and-’

‘Hang on. I can almost - there! I can hear it again. It’s in The Horsefair. Come on. We can cut through Market Street.’

Walking now, unable to run in the hot press of bodies. Market crowd, jostling and shouting, marking bargain territory; an ambling maze of shorts and sandals, sun block and moisturiser; undertow of voices tugging this way and that.

‘Can you hear it?’

Brun, turning slowly.

‘Here- no, here!’

The crowd, surging against a tide locked shop front; splashes of beach-bright colour ebbed to reveal half a century of brass-green flotsam.

‘There. The junk shop. It’s in the junk shop.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I can feel it. Waiting in there, in the dark. Calling out for someone. For me.’

Rising now, a bittersweet melody summoned them. To Brun it was ice crystals melting in a summer fjord.

‘So lonely.’

The shop door, scraping open at her touch. Medals and horse-brasses muttered clangorously in the gloom.

‘It sounds like snow,’ she said.

‘The brass?’

‘The music.’

‘Snow doesn’t have a sound.’

‘That’s right. It’s perfect. Perfectly silent. The music is perfect too.’

‘Brun, how many allergy pills did you take this morning?’ Chad sighed. ‘Look, let’s get out of here. Forget the song, or whatever it is. Let’s find a cafe and have a cup of tea and a roll. We can do the cliff-walk or the beach. I’ll even go to Arcade with you if you really want.’

‘Gosh what a sacrifice.’

Her voice quiet, almost still, close by yet at the same time somewhere else entirely; clouds reflected in a flat mountain lake.

‘Go if you want. I’ll find you later.’

‘Brun, wait. I don’t feel- I mean something’s not-’

‘What?’ Impatience. ‘It’s hot out here. The air is burning and I didn’t bring any sunblock. At least let’s go inside for a breather.’

‘Alright, but-’

‘Just a breather Chad.’

‘Alright.’

Entering the shop took real effort, like wading through surf. Inside, summer driven briefly away, they stood together, pressed arm to arm between rolling hills of junk and trinkets. Here, grimy timepieces. There, damp-speckled pictures. An Ormolu clock; the lacquer inlay blackened and split. A warped Danby print in a peeling gold frame, mildewed lightning forked above hell’s toiling minions. A frayed picnic basket full of ghostly cutlery propped against a glass bubble in which a stuffed Barn Owl gripped dead tree bark.

‘Clockwork fossils,’ she said dreamily. ‘Buried in a landscape of other peoples lives.’

Her image struck a chord. He frowned, idly peeling chrome flakes from silver coal tongs.

‘Where’s the shopkeeper?’

The question, answered by sudden movement. Shadows within fool’s gold shadows.

‘Oh!’

Brun, her voice, startled, jerked in the dusty silence.

‘You were there all the time. Why didn’t you-’

‘Didn’t see the need, did I?’

The shopkeeper was old, manner brusque, patience short as his body. He wore dark clothes and his skin, what they could see of it, was just as dark. Not melanin, something else. More like a bruise, Chad found himself thinking. As if he’d spent so long inside his shop the shadows had tanned his skin the way sunlight would if he’d spent the time outdoors. As if... somehow... he were made of shadows.

‘Haven’t got time to spend on you lot.’

His voice, anything but shadowy.

‘The Music Store’s a way down the road if it’s hands-in-the-air tunes you want. The only records you’ll find here are seventy-eights, if you can

remember them.'

'Seventy-eights. Now let me see. Gran had some when she was a kid. Or was it Great-Gran?'

'Chad!'

'Well.'

Brun, sighing.

'Ignore him. We're here on business.'

'Not trying to sell me something I hope.'

'Oh no, nothing like that. I'm here because we... I'm here to... well... you'll think it strange but-'

His eyes, dark lit, interrupted silently.

'Look, you're right,' Chad said. 'Hands-in-the-air tunes, that's us. Sorry to waste your time.'

The shopkeeper clearly thought a reply unnecessary.

'It was the music,' her voice a jigsaw in the motionless air. 'We followed the music.'

'Is that what you did?'

'Chad-' her eyes, pleading for support.

'We heard... something,' his sigh a rush of breath. 'Old chimes. We thought it was an ice cream van. We followed it here.'

'Spur-of-the-moment, eh? Think it's wise to just follow things without a reason, do you?'

'I don't know,' her voice, raised defiantly. 'Sometimes, yes. If it's important.'

'And was it? This music?'

'Yes, very. It was... I mean, it made me feel as if… oh look, like this-'

Her voice, lifting in song; the icy melody pure enough to shatter glass or

hearts.

‘You see? Like snow.’

‘How come I couldn’t remember the tune and you could?’

Chad, frowning.

‘I don’t know. It just felt... right,’ her voice, puzzled. ‘As if it was written for me.’

The shopkeeper, his head a pendulum; apprehension, relief, slow understanding.

‘You’ll be here for the Symphonion, then.’

‘The what?’ Chad asked.

‘The Symphonion.’

The shopkeeper’s hand, a craggy signpost in the shadows.

‘The music box.’

A bonsai castle, it staggered upwards in gothic tiers from the junkscape.

‘Oh!’

She was gone, attention trapped in the gravity well of lacquered inlay and crystal facet; spindle, socket and winding handle.

‘It’s beautiful.’ Her voice, tumbling; yaw and pitch past design tolerance.

‘It’s a Lochmann original. 1889. Interchangeable star-disk mechanism. But the wood is older, I think. Possibly much older.’

‘It’s got a drawer at the bottom.’

‘For disks.’

‘I see. Are there any- oh.’ Disappointment. ‘I suppose they’ve been lost over the years.’

‘No. They’re around here somewhere. You’ll need the operating keys as well. This model is custom made. There are two keys. Come back on

Saturday.'

'If we agree to buy it.'

'Chad! Of course we'll buy it,' her voice, eager, lifted expectantly. 'How much does it cost?'

'And don't give us any of that, "Where there's muck there's brass," malarkey, either,' said Chad. 'We all know what the difference is.'

The shopkeeper's look, piercing, swept across them; assessing, gauging; sizing up their potential finances, lingering particularly on Chad's flat pockets.

'The music box will cost you everything you have.'

His voice, the dangerous rumble of sliding earth.

'All of you.'

Chad grinned. 'In that case, since Brun's broke and I've only got a pound for the arcade, I'd say you've got a deal.'

Outside the shop, shadows banished, they stood in the sun and gazed at their new acquisition. If anything the music box looked even more tattered and out of place in the daylight. Lacquer missing, cabinet scarred and scratched by time. Something inside rattled as they pushed through the market crowd.

'Over a hundred years old,' Brun said reverentially. 'Think of that. It's so old, so... it feels like I'm holding a church.'

Chad was scathing. 'What was I thinking? A pound! Look at this thing. Bits falling off all over. It's only fit for a junk shop. Dad'll kill us when he sees it. "What've you gone and wasted your money on now?" That's what he'll say. And I'd have to agree with him.'

Anonymous in the ebb and flow of the market crowd, Brun set the box on a stone wall for closer examination.

'Why did he say "All of you,"' said Chad, suddenly puzzled, his mind snagged on shop-soiled conversation. 'I mean, why "all" and not "both?" Why not, "both of you?"'

'How do I know? A slip of the tongue?'

‘Huh. Slip of the brain if you ask me. Thought he was a fossil himself at first.’

‘Chad,’ her voice, reproving, a tense interruption as she gently hinged open the lid of the cabinet.

‘What?’ Scarred pits showed where the lid had been used as an ashtray sometime in the past. ‘Come on, I want to see the mechanism. Didn’t these old things have metal combs or something? Oh look - there’s no disk here either - there’s a surprise. You know we got ripped off, I suppose?’

‘Chad!’

‘What!’

‘Haven’t you seen it?’

‘For heaven’s sake. Haven’t I seen what?’

‘There’s a picture. Inlaid into the wood. Decoration.’

‘A girl on a cliff. So what?’

‘A girl, on a cliff, by a waterfall. Chad, look at her hair, her clothes. It’s Freya, Chad. It’s the girl from my story.’

His voice, thoughtful. ‘Well, the lacquer’s half gone and colour’s faded... but, you know, you could be right.’

‘Could be? I am! And look,’ she added excitedly. ‘There’s something written here. Inscribed on the inside of the lid. What does it say? Can you make it out?’

Squinting, he tilted the box; sunlight flowed around the grooves of the lettering.

‘ “In my wealth shall no man delight.” ’

Suddenly wary, he lowered the box; placed it back down on the wall. ‘In my wealth shall no man delight. What’s that all about then? I mean - what’s the point of writing something like that on a music box that everyone is supposed to enjoy? It defeats the objective.’

‘I don’t know.’

Her attention captivated; orbit decaying, risking burn-up on too steep a re-entry.

‘Maybe it’s not about the box,’ she said thoughtfully. ‘Maybe it has something to do with the picture.’

‘Whatever, we can’t let dad or HM see it. We’d never hear the end of it. We’ll have to hide somewhere. The attic maybe. Pretend we found it there.’

Her fingers, tracing the design on the inside of the lid.

‘Hide it? Oh, but we’ll need to study it- clean it, I mean, then study it. It’s so old. Who knows what story it has to tell-’

‘I tell you one thing. We already know the weirdest thing there is to know about it.’

Her fingers, touching the music box, closed the lid.

‘What’s that then?’

‘Think about it: matey in there said we had to come back Saturday for the keys and disks. Without them the box can’t play, right?’

Her eyes, suddenly wide, glowed with excitement.

‘So how did it make the music we heard?’

Chapter 2

Stubborn as only old stone can be, the farmhouse called Appledore hunkered in slanting afternoon sunlight, a good run from town and guarded by the trees that lent it their name.

Chad, human gale, ignored the ancient five bar gate, bounced over the dry stone wall, tyre-screeched across loose gravel and gusted into the kitchen.

‘Despite expectations to the contrary, the prodigal son returns from points west with news from the Rialto for Mum Number Two.’

The woman curled comfortably around a mug of sweet-smelling herbal tea, glanced up from the kitchen table.

‘Hello Chad. Don’t mix your literary references.’

Hjelle Miyake, smiling, lit the room.

‘So sorry. Cardinal sin I know. It’s the lack of cake.’

‘How was it then? Your day, I mean. Stultifying? Fantasmagorical? Tell me all about it, do.’

‘You know, a smidge of this, a smatter of that.’ Chad shrugged. ‘All of which adds up to a rare old hunger. Do we have cake?’

‘Ah, avoidance. Same here. I’ve been trying to finish my thesis but no luck. Bells. All day. Some church or other. Did you hear them?’

Brun strolled into the kitchen dusting her hands, dumped herself into the basket-weave chair at the head of the kitchen table.

‘As a matter of fact we-’

‘-didn’t hear anything. Nothing at all. Not a dickie bird-’ Chad interrupted his sister forcefully. ‘Did we sis? In fact we had a nice quiet day, thank you for asking. Hello fridge; very pleased to make your – hey! - no cake? What kind of expedition are you running here anyway?’

‘The kind where you have financial independence to buy your own snacks, as requested.’ Dirt hung war paint on his father’s cheek. Spanners like six guns slung low at his waist, he ducked beneath old beams into the kitchen.

Chad looked forlornly up from the empty shelf labelled with his name. ‘Hi Dad. More grease-monkey mojo?’

‘It’s not mojo, it’s a classic 85 Mazzerati. It’s my holiday too, you know.’

‘Hm. I’ve heard this theory. Tea, anyone?’

Toying with her wicker placemat, Brun announced, ‘I wrote another chapter today.’

Hjelle Miyake said, ‘Jealous. I couldn’t concentrate at all. Three drafts and it still wouldn’t come right. A nice camomile tea would be wonderful, Chad, thank you. Roger, if you’re looking for Swarfega there’s some under the sink.’

Emptying the kettle into the farmhouse’s white ceramic sink, Chad said, ‘It was a good chapter, too. At least I thought so. Hello. No water then?’

He spun the tap, then shook it.

Wheezing and knocking issued forth.

‘Must be blocked.’

A sigh from Roger. ‘There goes my bath. Chad, why don’t you try filling the kettle from the bathroom?’

‘Bleucch.’

‘It’ll be fine when it’s boiled.’

‘I’ve heard that theory.’

Chad wandered out of the kitchen. A moment later there was a sound

like machine gun fire coupled with a metallic screech. Chad reappeared looking alarmed.

'No good. Must be blocked all the way back.'

'Back to where?'

'A good question.' Hjelle Miyake shrugged. 'The mains are in the basement. The Rental Agent said so. Roger?'

Chad dumped the kettle back onto its worktop stand. 'Forget it, Dad.' To Hjelle Miyake, he added, 'The big lummox got lost in his own garage once. Where's the torch?'

'Under the sink next to the Swarfega.' Roger held out his hand. 'Pass it over would you? Thanks.'

Hjelle Miyake followed Roger from the kitchen.

Chad dumped himself into a seat opposite Brun. 'Did you manage to hide it?'

Brun avoided his glance.

'The music box! Did you hide it?'

Her voice, a whisper. 'I couldn't get to the attic. The basement seemed easier-'

'The basement? Why didn't you say something? Now he's going to-'

'Look what I found downstairs!'

Roger's voice issued forth from the basement stairs like that of a triumphant potholer. A moment later the Symphonion was seated neatly in the middle of the kitchen table.

Hjelle Miyake, summoned by the excited cry, said, 'It's a music box. It looks so old. It's beautiful. Or at least, it could be. Who do you suppose it belongs to?'

Chad frowned. 'How about the pipes, dad? Or are we begging tea from the neighbours until we can call out a plumber?'

Explosive gurgles from the sink interrupted Roger's reply.

‘The tap!’

Three pairs of hands closed around the tap at the same time. Water sprayed.

‘Chad,’ said his father reprovingly.

‘Sorry, sorry. Suppose I didn’t turn it off properly when I tried to fill the- hello. What’s this?’

‘At least we know why it was blocked now.’ Roger’s voice held surprise.

‘Brun, come and look!’

The sink was full of ice.

‘Ice. In the middle of summer,’ her voice, distant, trickled like snow on branches. Her eyes, victim of the slush-filled sink, saw only a snow-laden fjord etched in ancient lacquer work.

Roger shrugged. ‘Fish and chips all round then. There’s cash in the jar. Better buy some mineral water as well, enough for the night. I’ll call the Agency in the morning, get a plumber out or something.’

Brun frowned. Her finger, dipping towards the sink, hovered just short of the ice.

‘Come on you two. Jar. Cash. Chips. Quit lazing and start earning your keep.’

‘Chips? But what about the-’

‘Sure Dad, come on Brun. We’re on a mission.’ Chad, interrupting, took his sister’s arm.

Out in the yard, the sunlight had deepened to a golden glow. Somewhere a gull complained.

Chad shivered.

‘Ice in the middle of summer, Brun. That’s my definition of freaky.’

‘It’s the box. The Symphonion.’ Her face, lifting, drank grateful sunlight. ‘And it’s not freaky. It’s... I don’t know. I don’t have the words.

Not yet anyway.'

'And you want to be a writer.'

'I am a writer. I want to be a good one. Oh come on. I'm starving.'

Brun ran. Her arm, pulling free of his, felt like snow sloughing from a winter branch.

Later, munching chips, Chad found the town a shadow of its daytime self. People moved through the cobbled streets, heads down, huddled in coats. They looked cold even though the temperature was still quite balmy.

'It's like those films.' Chad, his voice a whisper.

'The sun goes down and the freaks come out.'

Snorting, Brun brushed wind-tossed hair from her eyes.

'That's right. Take the mick, go on. As if you're the only one who can use long words.'

'Quantity and quality are two different things.'

Chad, unsettled, slowed to a walk.

'Go on then, you do better.'

Brun, arms outstretched, swung round an iron-stemmed Victorian lamp-post.

'It's like the TV when you turn it off. Just an afterimage full of dots, stars before your eyes.' Her voice, soft and cold, whirled like twilight snow. 'Dead air and all the colour gone. The people too. The real people I mean.' Dervish breath came in clumps between her words. 'I can hear the town breathing now. Salt breath, like seaside rain. Summer in, winter out. The star-people are coming.'

Chad grinned, gestured with a pickle. 'Zombies at the chip shop. Choose your weapons. Kebab skewers at dawn, that sort of thing.'

'Be serious, Chad.' Her voice, dark and somehow lonely. 'Can't you feel it? Taste it? You said you could.'

For a moment he heard chimes, a song of ice, rippling on the air like

apple-blossom. He shook his head. The sound was gone.

‘ “The first pickles to bite back.” That’s what I can taste.’

Her sigh, a blow.

‘It’s no good sulking. I’m your brother, I’m immune. Come on. Dad and Hjelle Miyake will be waiting. The grub will go cold.’

‘You go. I want to stay out for a bit.’

‘Where? We’ve no money. It’s getting dark. And everything’s shut anyway.’

‘The Arcade.’

‘Arcade’s for losers.’

‘Vincent’s not a loser.’

‘Vincent, Vincent, bloody Vincent.’

‘Swearing is the last refuge of an unimaginative mind.’

‘If I believed that I’d believe infinitives should never be split and then where would the TV writers of the world be? Anyway, it’s recourse, not refuge.’

‘Just because he likes my stories.’

‘Just because you fancy him, you mean.’

‘Are you coming or not?’

‘Suppose so. With any luck he’ll be away with the faeries.’

Powdered with salt, Arcade squatted on the town pier, inched a little further into the ocean with each high tide. Sounds drifted from inside, the mutter and thrill of machinery, loose change, gamblers, cheap pop. Arcade had a voice, Chad thought, throaty, somehow sullen, a match for its over made-up face.

Brun, seemingly immune to the mood, agitated.

‘Come on, what are you waiting for?’

‘This place freaks me out. All those people, standing to attention, real arms moving fake arms, fruit machines, pennies in slots.’ Chad’s voice, curious, swallowed up by the dense throat of Arcade. ‘Robots operating robots.’

Teasing, another sound drifted faintly nearby. Cold as snow, melting ice; a familiar trickling melody.

Brun, suddenly smiling, took his hand.

‘It’s cold out. It’ll be warm in there. All the lights, people laughing, the music.’

‘Cheap pop, years out of copyright.’

‘No, Chad. It’s like Christmas. Can’t you see?’ Her voice, sparking, spun fairy lights in the dusk, drawing him in.

‘Christmas in the middle of summer. Makes no sense.’ His voice, barely audible, orbiting the anomaly. ‘I wonder how old this place is, anyway.’

‘That’s the trouble with you. Always asking questions.’ Her hand released his. ‘Can’t you ever just accept a thing for what it is?’

Undocked, she fell away, through peeling saloon doors into a fog of light and noise.

‘I thought writers were supposed to question everything!’

‘What was that? I can’t hear you!’

‘I said, I thought writers were supposed to-’

‘-what?’

‘I said- oh forget it!’

Chad hesitated. Saloon doors flapped shut. Arcade swallowed his sister.

‘Sis!’

Only the voice of Arcade remained: for one second a heartbreaking melody; pure, like melting ice.

‘Brun!’

Just Arcade, breathing.

‘For crying out loud-’

Opening the doors, Chad pushed into the light. A barrier, it held him back. Walking here was like wading though mud at low-tide. The shiny faces of people and machinery, the raucous blare of a hundred idiot-riffs. The saloon doors flapped against his back. Shell-shocked, he pushed forward. Arcade breathed him in.

‘Brun? Hang on!’

‘... to get a candyfloss!’

Her laughter, washed on a tide of light, drawing him further in.

Chad, wading, moved between fruit machines and arcade games, gleaming adults. No child’s thrill in the voice of Arcade. Not this time of night. He turned suddenly, caught by his own reflection in a glass booth. Behind the reflection, superimposed like a damaged photograph, the face of a girl.

‘Looking for change?’

‘You could say that.’

The girl, scowling, turned away. Chad waded deeper into Arcade; fish and chips and sausage-in-batter cooling in soggy paper, a used supermarket carrier.

Where was Brun?

Chad, squinting, peered into the light, saw endless people slotting coins and yanking handles, reflections in a hall of mirrors.

He abandoned the idea of shouting.

Arcade, a bright crowd, jeans and T-shirts, chatter and laughter. Chad, threading the crowd, shivered as cold, salty drafts trickled damply between the people, clinging to his face or hands. The ocean, he thought, trying to get in. He pictured salt powdering saloon doors, frosting wooden boards and glass panels, silting plum and cherry, lemon, lime and orange like snowdrifts, like ice. Frost-like, the air gathered in his throat. A melody, heartbreakingly pure, coalesced from the idiot voice of Arcade. It hung in

the air before him, trickled slowly – purposefully – through the staggered tiers of crowd, fruit machines, pumping handles, pulsing lights. He shook his head, unable to escape the sound of chimes, the image of a girl standing high on a waterfall, inscribed in peeling lacquer work.

'Brun!'

The boards seem to rise against his feet, thought of the open space beneath them and the long drop to the star-washed tide inducing vertigo.

'For heaven's sake!'

The girl. The waterfall.

'Brun where are you?'

Choking on light, he turned endlessly.

He thought, run! Run now! Where though? And what about-

'Chad! Hey Chad. It's OK, I'm here.'

Her hand on his back, gently rubbing, a reassuring pressure.

'I've got candyfloss. Want a bite?'

'The music. Did you hear?'

'I'll say. Hands in the air. Cheap cheap cheap!'

'Not that. A melody. The same tune we heard this morning. Come on, you know! The music box.'

'You heard the Symphonion?'

Her voice, falling, clotting in the light.

Her eyes, unsmiling, caught his.

He thought, trap. But was she trapped or trapper?

He shivered.

'I want to go.'

'I like it here.'

‘It’s rubbish. Superficial. It doesn’t mean anything.’

‘Tell that to the people that earn a living here.’ A new voice, older, more mature.

Releasing her brother, Brun beamed. ‘Vincent!’

He emerged from the light, no boy but a young man, tall, angular, confident. Dark eyes that drank the light of Arcade moved restlessly over Chad and locked onto his sister.

Chad thought, heat-seeker.

‘I hoped – I thought you might be here.’ Brun, suddenly shy, munched candyfloss, avoiding the proffered connection.

‘Long time no see.’ The voice, a salt-roughened grumble, pushing aside the frenetic voice of Arcade. ‘Made your fortune in publishing and forgotten about us mere mortals then?’

Charmed, Brun giggled. ‘Dad took us to Japan to see our step-mother’s family. That wiped us out for a while. This is our first time back for ages.’

‘Exotic.’

Frowning, Chad remarked casually, ‘So impressive, the way Sir Vincent the Bold effortlessly makes the word both a response and a compliment.’

Vincent laughed. ‘Nice to see some things don’t change.’

‘Speak for yourself.’

‘Chad!’

‘Chad yourself. It’s a free world.’

Vincent put his arm through Brun’s.

‘Come on. There’s a kettle back in the office. I’ll stand you both a brew. We can talk about old times and you can tell me about your new novel.’

‘You’re really interested?’

‘Would I ask otherwise?’

Brun, glowing, turned to her brother. ‘Chad?’

‘I’ll pass thanks.’

‘Suit yourself.’ Her voice, cold as an arctic melody.

‘Have fun with your candyfloss.’ His words, a missile. ‘I’m taking the grub home for Dad and Hjelle Miyake.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah.’

‘OK. Well. I won’t be late.’

‘Whatever.’

Arcade coughed him reluctantly onto the boardwalk. Saloon doors slapped salty night air behind him. It was cold, the air wet with a tang of brine. Chad bent over, hands on knees, gulping air. A darkness filled with sparks swelled behind his eyes, as if he’d risen too suddenly from a hot bath, then abruptly something snapped, and the awful pressure was gone. Chad took a few deep breaths, enjoying the freezing sensation of wet air in his lungs. He straightened slowly, hesitated, then with a firm stride, began to walk back along the wooden pier.

‘The journey of a thousand miles.’

He stopped.

It was a girl’s voice, low, soft, somehow penetrating. Turning, he saw a duffle-coated figure, head bundled in a tartan scarf and woollen hat, feet jammed into scuffed hiking boots. The thin strip of face visible between hat and scarf seemed pale, streaked with dirt, as if the glass reflection from the booth where she worked still hung between them.

The girl from Arcade.

‘Still after change then?’

‘Strictly speaking I give change, I don’t take it.’

‘What about people’s winnings?’

‘There’s a rule. We don’t change it back. That way they’re more likely to put it back in the machines.’

Chad shook his head. ‘So much cynicism in one so young.’

‘It’s not my rule.’

‘You obey it though.’

A moment hung between them.

Do you always obey the rules?’

The girl shifted and light from Arcade fluttered briefly across her face. Not dirt. Tears.

Chad, suddenly stupid, groped for words.

‘I’m Chad.’ His voice, awkward, stumbling in the darkness. ‘And you are?’

‘Late for the rest of my life.’

Feet scuffing, she scrutinised him.

Chad, caught off guard, hunted for a response.

‘I have to go.’

The girl, turning, marched abruptly away.

‘Hey, hang on! At least tell me your name!’

Her boots, thudding, shook the boards beneath his feet.

‘Please!’

The girl, hesitating, half turned.

‘You heard the music,’ her voice, trembling, snaked back across the salted boards. ‘The chimes, like melting ice. I know you did. I was watching.’

Her words, hammers.

‘What-?’

‘Don’t follow me.’

The girl, turning, passed through a puddle of sodium-yellow light and

into darkness. Her footsteps, heavy on boards then pavement, faded into the night. Only when she was completely gone, and all he could hear was the sound of waves breaking against wooden pylons, did he remember to move himself.

Chad, mind whirling

(orange lemon cherry plum)

and warming his chest with a bag of lukewarm fast food, set out slowly for home.

Behind him, somewhere out over the dark ocean beyond Arcade, the sound of chimes tumbled from a clear sky, like falling snow.

Chapter 3

‘Miracle you got any water out of those pipes at all.’

Chad, awakened early the next morning by a persistent humming sound, stuck his head round the kitchen door.

Six-thirty sunshine pushed in through the thick-glassed windows. Roger and a man in baggy blue mechanic’s overalls clutching spanners and a blowlamp were huddled together, head and shoulders into the cupboard beneath the sink. Strange noises echoed damply from within.

‘Yep. Major blockage in there, I reckon. Ice you say.’

‘I do say.’

‘In the middle of summer n’less.’

‘No less indeed.’

‘Straight-up peculiar. Never seen owt like it.’

‘Not since tax was rescinded for war-time vehicles still in use, anyway.’

‘Oh aye.’ The plumber’s monosyllabic voice rumbled out from beneath the sink. Chad, strolling into the kitchen, thought it sounded like the man himself was stuck in the pipes.

‘I thought it was odd too.’ Chad said brightly. ‘Given the summer temperatures this year. Even taking into consideration the insulating effect of hundred year old stone walls. Ice in summer. It’s straight-up peculiar and no mistake. By the way Dad, Hjelle Miyake says she’s staying in bed. Last night’s chips, she says, and where’s Brun?’

‘Oh, er, orchard I think. Took the music box out to clean it.’

‘Eh yup.’

Overalls tumbling from side to side like a ship’s sails, the plumber backed carefully out of the under sink cupboard.

‘Who’s this young ‘un then?’

‘My son. Chad, say hello to Mr Naslyn.’

‘Fast Eddie Naslyn. Eddie’ll do.’

Chad stuck out his hand. ‘And with confidence like that I’m sure you’ll have her fixed in two shakes of a lamb’s tail - won’t he Dad? Then full sail for bacon butties and a nice hot cuppa, I say.’

‘Chad, if you were any more precocious I’d have no choice but to sell you to science.’

Chad, shrugging, retorted, ‘They’re your genes. I’m merely renting them cheap.’

‘Eh yup. Into science are we lad? Like my Norris then. He’s into telescopes and that. All double-dutch to me. Look here.’ Slapping a torch into Chad’s outstretched hand, Fast Eddie Naslyn thrust his head and shoulders back under the sink.

Roger threw Chad a look – half grin half despairing shrug - and backed away to leave room enough for him peer in beside Eddie.

‘Scrunch up there, Fast Eddie. Let’s clear the decks and batten down the bolts and brasses.’ Clicking the torch on. ‘What am I looking at here?’

‘Here. See this?’ A spanner whanged loudly off a pipe. ‘That’s a nice echo that is. What my old gaffer used to call a church-ringer. Means the pipe’s empty. Nothing there.’

‘No blockage you mean?’

‘I do.’

‘How come the water’s not running then?’

‘Turned it off, didn’t I? That’s not the point. This is the point.’

The spanner whanged again.

‘That sounded different.’

‘Eh yup. You’re not wrong. The pipe here, see - back of the U-bend – there’s something in it alright. Stuck in there nice and tight, she is.’

Chad grinned. ‘Give ‘er a poke, shall we?’

‘In a mo’. Got to do a bit more investigation first. Here, take a breath. What do you smell?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Exactly. Sinks like this, they’re prone to blocking. Old pipes, new pipes, layers on layers, see. Additions, modifications, imperial fixtures, metric fixtures, continental adaptors. Middle of the two ends of it is, sometimes these old pipes, they peel. On the inside.’

‘The molecular structure breaks down with time. Material sloughs off and creates a bottleneck.’

‘Pressure backs up, all sorts of strange things happen. Talking pipes and stoppages and smells like the Old Man’s Sunday slippers-’

‘So Mister Naslyn, tell me. Is the patient a goner or are we going to be able to actually use the washing machine again this week?’ Roger, hip perched on a corner of the kitchen table, agitated placidly.

‘Oh, reckon so, reckon so. Like I was saying young ‘un, I don’t think it’s anything serious in there because anything serious-’

‘... would smell like the Old Man’s Sunday slippers!’ Chad backed on hands and knees out of the cupboard.

A snort from Fast Eddie. ‘He’s no slouch your young ‘un. Should apprentice the lad. Make a great plumber, he would.’

‘I’m not entirely sure I disagree. Do him good to get a bit of decent work done for a change.’

‘Dad! Remember what we said about double negatives.’

‘Ey, well, I’ll be off just now.’

‘Off? But I thought-?’

‘Aye, off. Need some things. Specialist gear and the like. I’ll leave me tools here in the meantime, if that’s acceptable.’

‘Specialist... ?

‘That’s ‘er. Back in a whiffler.’

‘And, uh... do you have any idea when that might be?’

‘Oh, by and by, Mr Jordan. By and by. But don’t you dwell on. I shan’t be leaving you without your hot tea and clean socks forever.’ Fast Eddie grinned. ‘And I won’t charge you for my abstinence, not like some’s I could name.’

Chad and Roger exchanged glances. Joke?

Roger shrugged.

‘Oh good. Well, look. I suppose you’d better see Mister Naslyn out then, Chad.’

Trailing Fast Eddie to the kitchen door, Chad threw his bemused father a grin. Outside, the bright morning sunshine was momentarily obscured by a cloud of oily petrol smoke produced when Fast Eddie started up his Morris Minor, parked neatly on the daffodils bordering the five bar gate.

Then with an enthusiastic backfire Fast Eddie, his car, and its smoke were all gone.

Hands on hips, Chad looked up at the bright sun, and sighed. ‘Happen,’ he said in a rumble. ‘Straight-up peculiar. Never seen owt like it.’

‘Is it fixed?’ Brun’s voice, soft but plaintive, carried easily through the clean air. ‘Have you brought tea?’

Chad strolled round to the back of the cottage.

The garden, once fields, a bright shadow stretching away from the whitewashed farmhouse walls. Grass waved everywhere, with honeysuckle and rhododendron. Apple trees grew in ranks like soldiers and blossom filled the air.

Chad, looking for his sister, saw only trees.

‘Brun!’

Chad, walking between the apple trees, crouched to peer beneath branches densely laden with blossom. The scent of summer was almost overpowering.

‘Over here!’

He turned.

Bark. Blossom. More trees, a maze. The farmhouse cottage, blurry with yellow sunlight, shining distantly through tunnelled avenues of green and white.

How could he have walked so far?

Chad, feeling the lack of breakfast, reached for a nearby apple - but did not pluck it.

‘Straight-up peculiar.’

The apple had split, its shiny green skin burst open in several places by pressure from within.

Chad, looking closer, huffed with surprise.

A prismatic gleam speared out from within the split fruit.

Crystals, melting in the dappled sunlight, clung to the apple’s skin and flesh.

Ice.

Puzzled, Chad plucked the apple from its branch.

‘Ouch!’

The fruit was snow-cold, and hard, as if deep frozen.

It stuck to his hand.

Chad, shocked, shook the ice-cold fruit loose from his skin. It rolled into the long grass and disappeared from view, taking a good layer of skin with it.

‘Chad where are you!’

Brun’s voice, shockingly loud in the leaf-whispering near-silence.

‘Coming!’

Chad, running, knocked aside laden branches. Apple-blossom swirled like mayflies, like snow, around his head. He thought, and that was something else strange, wasn’t it? Because apple fruit and apple blossom normally appeared half a year apart.

In the midst of the orchard was a clearing. The trees seemed to draw back at the sound of Brun’s voice, allowing him entry. Off to one side the clearing held a small wooden shed, an old-fashioned motor driven lawn-mower, some tins of petrol and a mountain of sacks stuffed with grass cuttings.

In the middle of the clearing, shaded by the trees, was a wooden pub-table, the kind with built-in benches on each side.

Brun, legs curled under her, sat with the Symphonion at one end of the table. Linseed oil and rags covered the tabletop.

The smell of apple-blossom was nearly overpowering.

‘Something’s humming.’ Chad, waving his hands, flapped apple-blossom from the air around his face. ‘I thought it was matey the plumber’s car but that’s gone now. Anyway it’s louder round here.’

‘Humming?’

‘Yes humming!’ Sharply. ‘You know – like bees. Or-’

Chad, frowning, slowed abruptly to a walk, gaze locked on the Symphonion.

‘-machinery.’

‘I can’t hear anything. Did you bring any tea?’

‘I should co-co. Apparently they need specialist gear. How’s it coming anyway?’

Brun, lost in the rhythm of oil and rag, didn’t look up.

‘I had a dream last night, Chad.’

‘You and everyone else who ever lived.’

‘Chad!’

‘Alright, sorry. Tell me more.’

‘I dreamed about the girl in my story.’

‘The girl with your name. And that’s unusual because-?’

‘She was here. Here in the town, with us.’

‘How’s that unusual? People have dreams about things like that all the time. I dreamed I was having a punt with Alice in Wonderland once.’

‘Oh for goodness’ sake, Chad, I’ll just shut up, shall I?’

Chad, softly, ‘No, go on. You’re too easy a target when you’re like this. Anyway, your dreams are interesting.’

Mollified, Brun said, ‘Well that was all there was really. She was real. A real girl. I could smell her hair, feel the rough weave of her clothes. She was wearing a necklace. A necklace of golden tears. She was by a waterfall but nothing was moving. Everything was covered in ice. Ice in the middle of summer. And there was music. Beautiful music. Like the music we heard yesterday.’ Her voice, slowing, hooked by a puzzle. ‘I’ve never dreamed about music before.’

‘It’s the Symphonion. You’ve got it on the brain. How’s the cleaning going anyway?’

‘I suppose you’re right.’

Her voice, sloughing its gloomy overtones, became firm again.

‘Come and see.’

‘Stop cuddling it then. Let’s have a gander.’

Brun, slowly gathering scraps of rag, retreated along the bench, away from the Symphonion. The ancient music box tumbled upwards from the tabletop, still scarred and pitted but now with a lustrous sheen acquired from Brun’s work with the linseed oil.

‘I’ve only just made a start on the outside.’ Brun, running a finger lightly across one of the few undamaged areas of lacquered wood, flicked aside a single flake of apple-blossom glued lightly to the patina of oil.

Her eyes closed briefly as her fingernail slid across the wooden surface of the box. Her hand trembled, an almost undetectable movement.

‘I need special machine oil to lubricate the mechanism. I thought you could get me some today.’

‘Not planning to see the blue-eyed Vincent then?’

‘Any reason I should?’

‘You tell me.’

Gaze distant, Brun drifted back towards the Symphonion.

‘What are you going to do today?’ Her voice, soft as flower petals, trickled like melting ice.

‘Breakfast. Thought I’d check out the caff on the high street. Fancy a butty?’

‘Saturated fats and glutens are bad for you. As it happens I’m not really very hungry. I think I’ll stay here and finish cleaning the Symphonion. Maybe I’ll write some more of my story.’

‘You’ll be doing better than Hjelle Miyake if you do. She’s in bed - still hearing bells if you ask me.’

‘She’ll never finish her degree at this rate. Maybe I’ll visit while you’re out. Bring something nice back for her won’t you?’

Chad glanced again at the wooden box on the table. Reflected sunlight gleamed brightly from its patterned inlay and the engraved silver plate around the winding socket.

‘Where’s the handle?’

‘There’s a compartment in the side. I’ll soak it in oil later. You need to get a light oil, not heavy, OK? Dad said.’

OK, OK. Light oil, prezzie for HM. Anything else while I’m at it. The Moon maybe?’

‘No, that will do. Oh. You could get me a new notebook. I filled the old one up yesterday.’

‘Impressed.’

‘It’s the Symphonion... it inspires me. Those pictures in the lacquer work.’

‘Yeah, how about that. Let’s have a shufti.’

Almost shyly, Brun turned the box to face her brother.

A girl, once exquisite, made of oak and ash and beech and cedar looked out of the lid. A waterfall, delicately carved, tumbled across lacquered rocks.

Chad, frowning, studied the work. Something about the girl was familiar. Her face? Clothes? Posture? No. What then? The girl from Arcade? He struggled but it wouldn’t come.

‘You haven’t started cleaning the inside, you said?’

‘That’s right. Why?’

‘Dunno, really. Something’s different from yesterday.’

Brun, peering into the lid, smiled slowly. ‘I think you’re right. I think she’s moved, just a little. Look. Isn’t her foot a bit higher on the rocks? And her eyes, weren’t they looking left yesterday? They seem to gaze right at you now.’

The lacquer work girl’s expression was cold, like ice.

Chad thought, not the girl from last night, then.

‘She’s very beautiful. But so lonely.’

Chad, nodding slowly, saw the truth in her words.

‘A genuine heartbreaker.’

Brun’s hands, clapping loudly, recalled delightful childhood mysteries.

‘Chad! Maybe she’s inspired by my story! Maybe she’s sad because her destiny is to choose the one she loves to die.’

‘It’s just a picture, Brun. She’s not real.’

‘You never see the magic in anything, do you?’

Ignoring her disapproval, Chad, frowning, ran a finger across peeling gaps in the lacquer work. He thought, she'd be beautiful if her face was all there.

He said, casually, 'Don't go off the deep end. It's probably just the light.'

His fingertip, inching across the scarred lacquer, brushed words inscribed in the lid.

' "In my wealth shall no man delight." '

Chad picked at dirt and cigarette-scorched lacquer. 'Hey, what's this, do you see? Looks to me as if there might be something else written here. Another couple of lines maybe. Chuck us a cloth and I'll-'

'No!' Her voice a sharp crack, like wood split by ice. 'Cleaning the Symphonion is my job!'

His fingers curled suddenly back, as if from an electric shock.

A moment hung between them filled with apple-blossom; that and a melody, heartbreakingly pure, like distant bells, or melting ice.

Chad shivered, suddenly cold despite the sunshine, here in the gloom of the orchard.

'I've said it before and I'll say it again: who writes offensive rubbish like that on a music box?'

She took a breath. 'Someone who doesn't like music?'

'Everyone likes music. It's universal.'

Closing the lid, Brun sighed.

'Ow!' Chad gasped. Then, 'Thank heavens for that!'

'What?'

'My ears just popped. Like when you've been swimming. Just then when you closed the lid.' A frown. 'And you know what else? That humming I've been hearing all morning. It's stopped.'

Chapter 4

There was a place, beyond the town, close to the shore, where old rocks pushed high out of the sea. Grass grew in clumps along the ridge and the wind blustered hard and cold despite the bright sunshine. Stunted trees grew across the steep edge of the ridge, their branches all flung wildly inland by years of exposure to the elements.

Chad, seeking his muse, wandered among them clutching multipurpose bicycle oil and a madly flapping summer bouquet.

'They look like a row of girls, all tossing their hair at once.'

The voice, pitched low, familiar to Chad from the previous evening.

'The trees I mean.'

Chad, turning, saw an animated ankle-length duffle-coat and hiking boots. Streaked-glass eyes peered out from between a woolly Tibetan-style hat and a plain, tightly wound scarf.

'Following me then?'

Approaching slowly, the girl from Arcade swept hummocky grass with a broom-handle metal detector before each deliberate step.

'Only if those flowers are for me.'

'Sorry. Hjelle Miyake's taken to her bed. I'm under orders.'

'Always follow orders, do you?'

'Only when it means keeping the peace. Dad says I should join the UN. I think he just wants me to grow up in Africa so he doesn't have to blame himself for the tragedy of my formative years.'

‘Your father likes you.’

Chad, shrugging, said, ‘He offered to sell me to science this morning. Bits of me anyway.’

‘Make sure you get a royalty.’

‘Oho! The woman of mystery has a sense of humour.’

Chad, scrunching down on a grassy hummock in the shade of a tree, watched the girl walk her petulantly whining metal-detector slowly back and forth across the ridge. He was struck by the confidence of her movements on the steeply uneven ground.

‘And I thought I was the only one who knew about this place.’

‘In a town of thirty eight thousand seven hundred and three people?’

Chad raised his eyebrows.

‘I counted them once. Don’t ask.’

‘Trust me, I had no intention.’

‘Well the people who come here mostly do have intentions. Intentions they can’t actualise. People come here to be alone, to think about things. Being up this high gives you a perspective. In summer it’s cold and hot at the same time. And you’re right on the border between the land and the sea. A place of opposites, do you see?’

‘That’s most people, then. What about you?’

‘I come because I like the kooky trees.’

‘You said.’ Chad, plucking a blade of grass, stuck it ruminantly between his teeth.

‘I did.’

Assuming an important air, Chad said, ‘For myself, I rather fancy those trees are like a company of harlequins, all dancing a jig for the king of the wind.’

‘That’s your sister speaking.’ Her voice, quick as lightning, struck sparks.

Chad, surprised, let chewed grass fall from open mouth.

‘You know Brun?’

‘I’ve seen you both around. Not for a while though. Summer people. You didn’t come last year. She writes. Very well actually. You’re slightly jealous.’

‘As if!’

Her metal detector, whining as it swept back and forth, was the only reply.

‘Did you miss us, then, when we were away?’

‘I had other issues.’

‘Such as?’

‘I was in care.’

‘Oh. I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be. I stole things. Fireworks. Petrol. I burned down a shop. That’s all behind me now.’

‘Well thank the lord and all his little angels for small mercies.’

‘Your father’s right. You are precocious.’

Chad, shielding his eyes from the sun, looked up at the duffle-coated girl.

She fine-tuned the metal-detector.

Chad, wincing, stared at her fingers where they emerged from fingerless woollen gloves. Child’s gloves. Her fingernails were clean but short, as if to disguise being bitten.

‘That’s the second time I’ve been lost for words around you. Once more and it’ll be a habit.’

Completing a sweep that brought her to the edge of the trees, the girl perched on the grass close behind Chad. He could sense her move as she rocked the metal-detector back and forth across her boots. The whining noise ebbed and flowed.

Chad, wondering whether to be uncomfortable or not, shuffled uneasily.

‘Why were you crying last night?’

‘Why do you want to know?

‘I’m a caring soul. Were they happy tears or sad tears?’

‘Is there a difference?’

Chad sighed.

‘You’re as bad as my sister.’

‘I’ll tell you one day, I promise.’

Chad, chewing grass, thought hard for a moment.

‘It’s your first job isn’t it, making change in Arcade? You don’t like it, do you? It’s the people who go there. They look happy but they’re really sad. Sad on the inside. And cold too, in a weird kind of way. As if they live in summer, but never let it touch them. Never let it get inside, to warm them up.’

She said nothing, merely scrunched a little closer. Her duffle-coat brushed his spine. The metal detector hummed and squealed.

‘I like your metal-detector.’

‘Thanks.’

‘What are you looking for?’

‘Evidence of UFOs.’

A click as she turned off the device.

‘Laugh and I won’t kiss you.’

Chad snorted, recovering quickly.

‘Sorry! It’s a boy-thing. I suppose I’ve blown it now. No kiss for me. We’ll have to be just friends.’

‘I don’t do just friends.’ Her voice, a whisper.

‘In a different context that too could be funny.’

A moment hung between them. Wind, gusting, tried to fill the gap. Settling more firmly against him, she drove the wind aside.

Back to back, knees clutched in mirror image, boy and girl sat beneath harlequin trees and stared at the world, one out to sea, the other inland, towards the town.

The moment stretched. Chad felt her back move against his as she breathed. He thought hard for something more to say. Something to break the tension that seemed to press in on him from the rocks and grass, even the sky.

'We're looking in opposite directions but we can both see the same thing.'

If it was a race, she'd have won.

Chad, hooked on her words, said nothing.

'You're looking out to sea, I'm looking inland. We both see a grey tide. You see ocean, I see the stone of houses. The only difference is that my tide takes longer to ebb and flow.'

Chad felt something lurch inside.

A tide of houses. A revolution of architecture from cave to hovel, to cottage to house to tower block; keep to village, to town, to city; an iteration of shaped stone, flooding out into the landscape. Her image was inescapable. The world wouldn't be the same after today.

'Why did you burn down the shop?'

'I was King Canute, trying to hold back the tide.'

'No, seriously. I'd like to know.'

'How do I know I can trust you with my secrets?'

He considered. 'Fair enough. What about your name then. Can you tell me that?'

'You ask a lot of questions don't you?'

Movement, from behind him.

Chad thought, she's angry. The most interesting girl I've ever met and-

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to-'

'Sshh.'

The slow, deliberate movement continued. Chad frowned. The girl was taking off her hat and unwinding her scarf.

The movement stopped.

Chad, heart thumping, waited.

With the metal detector switched off other sounds rose to fill the void. Her scarf flapping in the wind, branches knocking and rustling, the greedy screech of a seagull. The humming sound from this morning was coming back too, with the sound of bells, like wind-chimes or melting ice, ringing softly in the distance.

'Your name is Chad.'

'How did you-.'

'Chad, Chad. Brun and Chad. One is good, the other is bad. Never a mother, only a Dad. Chad, Chad, Brun and Chad.'

Her voice, a part of the wind, rose in a melody, a child's rhyme.

Chad, suddenly angry, said, 'You're being childish, stop it. There's nothing wrong with Brun. And Hjelle Miyake's gorgeous. Dad did alright there, if you ask me.'

A moment of silence.

'Anyway, Mum died a long time ago.'

Her voice, lilting, stabbed again. 'In the Celtic language your name means, "Battlefield." Did you know that?'

Chad, blinking, rubbed sore eyes.

'Dad told me they argued once, about what to call me. Must have been a humdinger.'

The wind, gusting, tried to prise them apart.

He licked sea-salt from dry lips.

‘We’ve a window of opportunity, you and I.’

Her voice, softer now.

‘How shall we use it?’

Chad, stomach churning with butterflies, found himself shuffling sideways, her unexpected invitation a force beyond his control. He moved slowly, electrified by the touch of her shoulder, her arm against his.

He turned and the world slid out of focus.

Close-up, he saw the nape of her neck. Fine hair, jet black, wind-swept. He saw the soft shells of her ears, the skin smoothly scalloped, the curve of a hearing aid tucked behind the left. There was a scar on her neck, fingernail thin. One ear was slightly lower than the other.

She turned as he did, her face in silhouette against the sky, prismatic light scattered from wire-rimmed reading glasses.

And then, a marvel.

Her face.

Chad, gaping, blinked stupidly.

‘Oh, you’re-’ Firmly, ‘You’re beautiful.’

‘What did you expect – Old Mother Hubbard? I’m not the girl in the music box, Chad. I’m all here, for one thing.’

‘I thought – you covered your face, so I thought-’

His voice, tacking suddenly with the wind, lured by the image of a girl made of wood.

‘How did you know about-’

‘What’s my name Chad?’

Her voice, a whisper in the wind, silenced him as effectively as any gun shot, echoes rolling over the landscape to the horizon.

‘Tell me my name so I know I can trust you.’

And Chad, reasonless, whispered back.

‘Ellyn. Your name is Ellyn.’

She smiled then, and just for a moment the sun went out.

Later Chad, clutching windswept flowers, entered the farmhouse at a dead run to find it cold and apparently empty. The chilly rooms were humming faintly, like a distant swarm of bees or a dodgy food-freezer.

He skidded to a halt on the stone-flagged kitchen floor.

‘And so the weary traveller returns from points west with bromeliads and other exotic species of parrot.’

His voice, quiet to begin with, swallowed up in the claustrophobic vastness of the cottage.

‘Or not.’

Holding the image of Ellyn’s face in his mind’s eye as an explorer holds a warming lantern, Chad ventured deeper into the farmhouse.

The passage from the front door was wide and subtly crooked, recently modernised with painted plaster designed to set off the original stonework, which had been repointed. Thick beams hung from a low ceiling and oak frames supported heavy doors. Old and new, sandwiched together in one moment of time. Chad couldn’t help thinking about the ridge, and what Ellyn had said about opposites. Everything in his life seemed to be about opposites now.

Coincidence - or something more?

His knee knocked against a telephone table, half round, set against the passage wall. A digital ansafone perched atop the table, sleek and black. A tiny red light blinked regularly behind a smoked glass window.

Had everyone gone out? Maybe there was a message.

Chad reached for the playback button.

‘Flowers? For me? Chad, how thoughtful!’

Smiling, Hjelle Miyake lit the passage.

Chad, startled, turned too quickly, knocked the telephone table. The ansafone power cord pulled out of the socket and the light went dark.

'Oh blast. Now I've lost the message.'

'Never mind. What lovely flowers. Especially since I was feeling under the weather this morning. Guess what though? I managed to get a handle on my dissertation.'

'Cool bananas.' Chad, uncomfortable for no reason he could discern, forced a grin.

Heavy footsteps thudded on the stairs.

'All this talk of fruit is making me hungry. Hi Chad. Nice flowers. Let's get them into some water before they finish dying.'

'Roger!'

'Just kidding. Come on.'

Chad looked up. 'We have water?'

'We have lots of bottles. Fast Eddie never came back. His radiator burst. Ice, he said. He telephoned to apologise. Back tomorrow with, "Specialist gear." I don't think he meant snow shoes.'

Chad, following Roger through the passage, around the stairs and into the kitchen, mused, 'Burst radiators only happen if you don't use anti-freeze. But who uses anti-freeze in the middle of summer?'

'Match point to Chad, I think.'

'Thanks HM. And the pipes?'

'Still frozen. We walked into town this afternoon to get some more bottles.'

'Walked.'

'Yes. Odd thing that – the water in my radiator was frozen too, and the Mazz – just like Fast Eddie's. And I change my antifreeze like clockwork.'

'Never mind,' Her voice, amused. 'If it's no better tomorrow we'll call the Rental Agency.'

‘Frozen pipes for half a week in the middle of summer and two cars and a bike with burst radiators despite the use of antifreeze?’

Chad, dumping the flowers in the kitchen sink, laughed.

‘If it’s no better tomorrow I’d call the Vicar. Bell, Book and Candle, that’s the ticket. About time we had a good exorcism. Where’s Brun by the way?’

‘In the orchard. She’s been there all day. Writing I think. She took one of my notebooks, anyway.’

After the house, the orchard at least was warm, filled with sunlight, and long shadows walked slowly between the trees. Chad walked there too. He observed a few apples closely. Two showed signs of ice crystals but none had burst. The humming faded outside the house. And Chad felt himself begin to relax a bit.

‘Brought your oil. 3-in-1. Just the way you like it.’

‘Fantastic.’

Brun, smiling dreamily, still perched at the pub table. The pile of rags on the table was higher now, the level of linseed oil in the tin considerably lower.

The Symphonion gleamed, lacquered wood alternating opposites, dark and light.

‘It looks fantastic. You’ve really been busy.’

‘I know. It’s amazing what a coat of elbow grease will do.’

‘How did you manage to clean those specks of rust off the metal parts without light oil?’

‘Oh, you know, a little TLC goes a long way.’

‘And you’ve been at it all day.’

‘Why?’ Her voice, suddenly sharp.

Chad, shrugging, said, ‘No reason. Dad said you’d been writing that’s all. I wondered if you had anything new I could read.’

‘I did jot down some notes. I borrowed one of HM’s notebooks to write in.’

The notebook, covered with pictures of tropical frogs, lay open beneath a pile of oily rags.

Chad riffled the pages.

‘This is amazing.’

‘Thanks, Chad.’ Her voice, cheerful, a modest glow. ‘Some of my best work.’

‘No, I mean, it’s amazing, Brun. As in amazing and impossible. You’ve filled almost the whole book. How could you write all this and still clean the Symphonion so thoroughly in only a few hours?’

‘I have a muse now.’ Her voice, still soft, took on dark overtones.

Chad, suddenly cold, shivered.

‘The amazing blue-eyed Vincent?’

Her laughter, distant bells or melting ice.

‘Of course not, silly.’

‘What then?’

‘What else?’

Her gaze slipped sideways to the Symphonion. The lid, he noticed, was closed, the latch, for the first time, engaged.

‘The girl in the music box. Of course.’ Brighter, ‘She must look fantastic now. Can I see?’

Her eyes, narrowing, regarded him suspiciously. ‘No.’ Softer, ‘Not until I’ve finished cleaning her. Then I’ll show everyone.’

‘Don’t you think I deserve a look? After all I did pay for it. Technically the Symphonion’s mine.’

‘You can’t have her! She sang to me!’

Her voice, a blade, scraped his nerves raw.

‘Alright, alright, keep your socks on! I only asked!’

‘I’m sorry.’ Softer, ‘I suppose I feel a bond. Oh, go on Chad, indulge your sister this once. Take the notebook instead, read some of her story. You’ll like it.’

‘I’m sure I will.’

Chad, fingers numb, traded notebook for 3-in-1 oil.

‘Oh I won’t need that. Why don’t you put it in the shed?’

Chad, nodding, picked up the oil and, clutching the frogbound notebook, backed away from the table.

The humming sound followed him all the way back to the house. That and the sound of distant bells.

Chapter 5

‘Ow!’

Chad, dreaming, banged a restless knee against the stone wall of his bedroom. Half asleep, sweaty and dishevelled, he sat up in bed and looked around. Brun’s notebook, propped open where he had been reading it, flopped shut on his pillow.

He thought, something’s wrong.

The room was small, cluttered with simple furniture. Besides the bed there was an old fashioned cupboard with a built in chest of drawers, a small table and cast off straight-backed chair from the dining room. Chair and table were draped with clothes, unwashed since the pipes had frozen. The roof was uneven, supported by stained oak beams. The ceiling sagged noticeably towards the outer wall, where a small sash window had been replaced by a double-glazed unit. The window sill was oak, nearly a foot thick. A picture of children plucking apples hung in a tattered frame on one wall, the glass in one corner divided by a hairline fracture.

Chad, uncomfortable, shook his head.

Normally familiar, snug and warm, the room seem to cling to him like someone else’s wet clothes.

He thought, what’s wrong?

Pushing aside the bedclothes, Chad moved to the window. Outside the night was deepest blue, the sky full of brilliant stars. The apple trees shone too, their blossom a mirror to ancient light. And they were shaking. No – the window glass was shaking. Minute vibrations, like a washing machine turning over in someone else’s house. He could see his reflection and the edges of his face jittered, the features blurring in and out of focus.

Chad, palm out, touched the window. The vibration stopped. He removed his hand from the glass. The vibrations were back. On – no movement. Off – and back it came.

With it, a sound.

The glass was humming.

An electrical hum, the single note swam with harmonics like high tension wires humming in a steady wind. The same sound Chad had been hearing on and off since the pipes froze up.

Since they'd bought the Symphonion.

Chad, opening the window, breathed night air and starlight. The scent of apple-blossom drifted across the sill and with it came the sound of distant bells, a heartbreakingly pure melody.

'That's me.' Firmly, 'Enough is very definitely enough.'

Chad, closing the window, dressed quickly and left his room. He trod the stairs to the ground floor carefully. Something was telling him he'd catch a beating from Brun if she caught him doing what he was about to do.

At the base of the stairs, he checked for other night roamers. He detected nothing beyond the faint sound of snoring from his father's room above. He stepped carefully off the bottom stair then paused again, hand gripping the newell post. Something was odd, out of whack.

He thought, I can hear something. What is it? Don't know. A whining sound like a hearing test. Or maybe someone whispering. Yes, that's it, like someone talking, or singing a long way away. I wish I could make out what they were-

Frowning, no wait, that's not right. Not a sound, more like an absence of sound, the space between words-

Scowling, hang on though, that's not quite it either. What then? Come on, genius. It's either a sound or it isn't.

He listened harder. And suddenly he had it.

It's the sound your ears make when there's nothing to hear.

Chad, clothed suddenly in goose bumps, crouched at the foot of the

stairs as the non-sound gradually filled the space around him.

Where was the Symphonion?

Chad, considering, peered along the passage. Starlight entering through the leaded glass of the front door sent a shaft of pale blue knifing through the shadows.

A single red eye blinked on the ansafone.

A message – but he hadn't heard the phone ring.

Chad closed his eyes and listened. The humming sound seemed to be strongest in direction of the lounge.

Chad, rounding the stairs, moved along the passage and eased open the heavy oak door.

The room was in darkness.

The humming sound was louder than a whisper.

Chad took a step into the room. He felt carpet underfoot, deep, old. He took another step, felt something bang against his shin, nearly cried out.

He thought, calm down, hotshot, it's just the piano stool.

He remained still for a moment, letting his eyes adjust to the gloom. A thin stripe of stars peered in between heavy curtains. Blue and pearl light cut a slice through the room.

Shapes emerged gradually from the darkness.

Piano stool. Piano – over strung upright iron grand. Horsehair sofa. High, wing backed lounge-chairs. Television on its plastic stand. A folding table arranged neatly against the interior wall.

On the table, a dark, crenellated shape toppled upwards from the shadows.

The Symphonion.

The engraved metal plate surrounding the winding socket gleamed softly. Lacquered wood reflected a spectrum of blue.

He thought, it's like a black hole, warping even the starlight.

Chad, blinking, shook his head. The humming sound seemed to be more prominent. Now it seemed to be as loud as someone talking. Everything in the room seemed to be shaking, vibrating the way his reflection had in the window upstairs.

He thought, it's like I'm shaking loose from the world.

He took a step towards the table. Then another. And another.

Something was happening. He could hardly see for the vibrations. Everything was out of focus. And the humming was loud. As loud as someone shouting. Surely everyone could hear that? Roger? Hjelle Miyake? Why hadn't they got up to investigate?

Anyway, he couldn't see. Nothing made sense any more. It was all blue, pearl and blue light, splintered like ice, like cliffs of ice in winter fog.

Chad, wading through blue light, reached out for the Symphonion, the gleaming clasp that would release the once finely carved lid. His hand encountered resistance. As if the air were becoming solid, coagulated by the light coming off the box.

As if it knew he was there. Sensed his intention. Wanted to stop him from-

'Hey, Chad. You on walkabout too?'

Hjelle Miyake, smiling, shattered the spell.

'Couldn't sleep. Bells on the brain. Thought I'd make a hot chocolate. Fancy one?'

Chad, hand falling from the music box, turned slowly.

'Yeah. OK, yeah, we can boil some milk.'

'At least we don't have to worry about that going off.'

Chad laughed. 'Not in this cold.'

'Shh. You'll wake the others.'

Chad followed his stepmother into the passage. A few moments later milk and hot chocolate powder were bubbling on the oven, the kitchen fitfully illuminated by a warm gas flame.

‘How come you were up anyway?’

‘You know us teenagers. Restless spirits forever wandering.’

‘Now don’t start with that. Here. Drink your chocolate.’

‘Yeah, I know.’ Gulping. ‘Thanks. I don’t know if I should say. You’ll think I’m weird.’

‘What’s weird? My parents cooked meals for the ghosts of my grandparents and consulted their spirits on important family matters.’ Her voice, a melodic thread lacing the darkness of the kitchen. ‘Anyway, I already think you’re weird.’

‘Ah. Fear of the unlike. A common fault among adults.’

‘Weird in a good way. Now what gives?’

Chad, sipping chocolate, considered.

‘I’ve been hearing things. Music. Like bells, or... I don’t know. Melting ice. And a weird humming sound that comes and goes.’

‘Tinnitis?’

‘Not since the grommets came out. And that was years ago.’

She sipped chocolate.

‘Anyway, if it is then I’m suffering from it too.’

‘Oh?’

‘I hear bells, Chad. Like church bells. They’re there all the time but they seem to drift in and out if I’m distracted by other things, like... like a buoy in the harbour, maybe, ringing in the fog.’

‘And the fog is like real life.’

‘Yes!’ Her eyes, suddenly wide. ‘Yes, how did you-’

‘Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings, am I right? How long have you been hearing these bells?’

‘Since the day the pipes froze up. The day Roger found the music box in the basement.’

Chad, clasping his mug for warmth, considered. ‘The thing is, about the music box-’

Footsteps in the passage, reassuringly solid, brought Chad’s explanation to a halt.

‘Aha! Raiding party is it? Save me some booty.’

Roger, pyjamas flopping, bent down to enter the kitchen.

‘Sorry, dear. Didn’t mean to wake you. Have some chocolate.’

‘Thanks. Didn’t wake me. Couldn’t sleep.’ Sipping, ‘Oddest thing. Kept hearing church bells. This time of night! Reckon we really are a far cry from the madding crowd. Seem to have packed it in now though, thank heavens.’

‘Chad, rising, said, ‘My cue I think. And the precocious genius exits stage left.’

Hjelle Myake placed her hand on his arm. ‘Don’t rush. I was going to take this back upstairs anyway.’ Her hand moved to Roger’s. ‘Come on you. The night is for the young.’

‘The night is young, you mean... See you in the morning, chief.’

‘Night dad.’

‘Switch off the gas.’

‘Indubitably.’

Chad, refilling his mug, listened to footsteps thud back up the stairs and recede along the upstairs passage. His father said something. Hjelle Miyake chuckled. A door closed, cutting off the sound.

Chad, flame-lit in frosty darkness, sipped chocolate.

He closed his eyes.

Blackness.

Opened them.

The darkness did not change.

Closed them.

Opened them.

Closed them again.

Exquisite, a girl made of wood formed slowly out of the swirling darkness behind his eyelids, lacquered image bright with remembered starlight.

What would he have seen if he'd managed to open the lid of the Symphonion?

A girl? Any girl – or someone else, someone he knew? A more familiar face?

'Why are you up Chad?'

A girl's voice, soft in the darkness.

Chad, startled, grabbed for his mug, eyes snapped open.

The girl. He could still see her!

The image moved, gliding, drifted into the room, not wood dressed in lacquered blossom but flesh wrapped in a dressing gown.

'Brun. Holy cow, I almost died of fright!'

Her voice, a metronome, the measured drip of melting ice.

'Why are you dressed in the middle of the night? What were you doing in the lounge?'

'In the – how did you - ?'

'I was there Chad. I stayed up to write some more of my story but I fell asleep. When I woke up you were there. Your hand was on the lid. You were trying to open the Symphonion. Why were you doing that Chad? Did you want to see her again? The girl from my story? Why were you doing that after I asked you not to?'

'I – er... how about some hot chocolate?'

'No thank you. I'm not thirsty or sleepy.'

‘Water then? We’ve still got some bottles-’

‘Don’t avoid the question.’

Chad, annoyed, put down his mug.

‘Ever since we found that music box, things have been weird here. Between us too.’

Chad, tense, waited for the storm.

‘I know.’

Brun, hesitant, pulled out a chair and sat down slowly at the table.

‘It’s as if we don’t relate any more. As if we exist in different places now.’

‘Brun you’re my sister. We’re here, together. Right now. How can we exist in different places? I don’t even know what you mean by that.’

‘I don’t either, exactly. All I know is what I feel. I feel... disconnected, somehow. As if none of this, the farm, the beach, none of it is real.’

‘Except the Symphonion?’

‘Except the Symphonion.’ More normally, ‘I’ll take you up on that hot chocolate if you don’t mind.’

Chad, pouring, said, ‘I came down here to get rid of it. That’s why I’m dressed. Something stopped me. It stopped me, somehow, I’m sure of it. Then Hjelle Miyake came down for a drink and... well, here we are.’

‘I see.’ Sipping, ‘Thank you for not lying.’

‘Yes, well, I’m sorry. It was a stupid idea. It’s just a music box, right?’

‘I don’t want you to get rid of it, Chad, promise me. I’ve written so much since we found it, half my book maybe. The Symphonion helps me. It inspires me, I know it does. Please promise you won’t try to throw it away.’

Chad, acquiescing, felt tension drain slowly from his limbs. ‘Alright, alright! Whatever you say. I think you’re bonkers though.’

‘They thought Galileo was bonkers.’

A wry grin. ‘Galileo told the truth too. And look where it got him.’

‘Don’t be morbid. The Church recognised him, didn’t they?’

‘Five hundred years after he died under house arrest for heresy.’

‘I think we’re drifting off-point. Did you read any of my story?’

‘A few pages.’

‘What do you think then?’

‘Nobel for Literature by seventeen, I should think.’

‘Oh be serious.’ Flattered, ‘Really?’

‘Yeah. I’ll finish it off tomorrow.’

‘OK.’ Her voice, hesitant. ‘I’m sorry I snapped at you, Chad.’

‘Forget it.’

‘You were out a long time today. Did you go to the cliff?’

‘Yes. I met someone. A girl.’

‘You met a girl?’

‘It’s not entirely unknown you know!’

‘Come on then, spill the beans. Who was this femme fatale?’

Chad, sighing, said, ‘She makes change in Arcade. She’s a bit... I don’t know. She had a metal detector.’

‘Oh yes? And what did you detect together?’

‘We didn’t detect anything-’

She smiled then and just for a moment the sun went out.

‘-we just talked, that’s all.’

‘About?’

‘Stuff. Why the third degree?’

‘You’re too young to be seeing strange older women.’

‘You’re strange.’

‘I’m a writer. I’m allowed.’

‘Anyway, I’m not, “Seeing her.” ’

‘She is older though?’

‘I don’t know. I didn’t ask.’

‘Ah.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean? “Ah?” Come on, Brun, stop winding me up.’

‘Tell me her name then.’

Chad, grinning, ‘Does it matter?’

‘Just tell me her name!’

‘What if I don’t want to?’

‘Don’t you trust me Chad?’

‘Don’t be daft.’ Suddenly hesitant, ‘Of course I do.’

‘Of course you do. I’m your sister.’ Quietly, ‘I let you read my book, didn’t I? Tell me her name, Chad. Then we’ll be even.’

Chad, frowning, peered into her face. Gas-flame from the hob painted shimmering blue, like starlight, on her skin. Her eyes seemed to suck in the light so that all else was darkness.

‘Why should we be even?’ His voice, pensive, full of shadows. ‘We’re brother and sister. Reader and writer. Reason and imagination. We’re opposites, Brun. Why should we be even?’

‘Everything has to balance.’

‘Everything?’

‘Of course, everything! If not then all will fail, and in failing, fall to nothing.’

‘That sounds like a quote.’

‘Tell me her name.’ A hiss. ‘Tell me!’

‘I don’t think I will.’

Brun, scowling, leaned across the table. Her face, blue shifted with gas-light, alarmingly close.

‘Please Chad! It’s important. You know I wouldn’t ask otherwise.’

Something rang, like distant bells or melting ice. And the humming sound was coming back.

‘Alright! You win. Susan. Her name’s Susan.’

Brun, relaxing, leaned back in her chair. The sound of bells faded into the distance. The humming sound remained.

‘There, you see? Nothing bad came of that, did it?’ Her smile, a glimpse of winter sun through cloud.

‘No vicious wolves or ice-giants came to devour the sun or fight in the earth.’

‘You’re right about that, anyway.’ Chad, rising, dumped his mug in the sink. The kitchen was cold, far too cold. It was like winter, or one of the Norse myths Brun used in her story.

‘I’m for some zees. Leave the mugs if you like. I’ll do them in the morning.’

‘OK, thanks. I think I’ll stay up and write some more. I’m really hitting my stride.’

‘Great.’

‘Thanks for chatting. Maybe you and Susan could come out with Vincent and I sometime?’

‘OK, sure. Why not? Pictures, OK? We’ll see what’s on in the morning.’

Chad, leaving the kitchen, moved slowly along the passage. The humming sound dragged briefly at him as he passed the closed lounge door. He ignored it with some effort.

In his room, Chad collapsed on the bed with a groan.

He thought, time for zees is right. I feel like I've run a marathon.

He shifted position and stretched out. Something fell against his cheek. Frog-bound, Brun's notebook lay where it had fallen on his pillow when he had slept.

Opening the book to the middle pages, Chad felt his heart pound. He sat up, sleep banished. When he'd gone to sleep every page had been covered in his sister's neat handwriting. Now there was nothing written in it at all.

Every single page was empty.

Chapter 6

‘Barometer’s still dropping then.’ Roger, hale and hearty, thundered through the house.

‘Storm on the way I shouldn’t wonder.’

Chad, disengaging from his quilt, felt the day, muggy and oppressive, begin to close in. Rubbing sleep from his eyes, he lurched to his feet. Brun’s notebook was on the floor of his bedroom, closed. He dressed quickly, jamming the book into his pocket without opening it. Chad, fingertips brushing the door, hesitated. Something – a left over feeling from the previous night, possibly – rang in his head. Why did he feel it was somehow to his advantage that no-one knew he was awake?

Chad, reaching for the doorknob, hesitated.

Outside, something banged.

Thump. Thump-thump.

The front door. Someone knocking, a deliberate pattern.

Chad remained motionless.

Footsteps, more thumping. Mutter of voices.

Then, ‘Chad!’ Roger, shouting fit to raise the dead. ‘You’ve got a visitor!’

Chad bit his lip.

More voices, quieter now.

‘Come on in.’ Roger, ‘We’re just on our way out but you can wait in the kitchen for his lordship.’

‘Haven’t any tea I’m afraid, pipes on the blink.’ Hjelle Miyake now. ‘Milk suit you? Or we’ve some juice.’

‘Chad!’ His father again, ‘Shake a leg or Christmas will shake it for you!’

‘Hold your horses! Rome wasn’t built in a day!’

The front door closed.

Chad, breathless, wrenched open his bedroom door, ran the landing, vaulted the stairs and skidded into the kitchen.

Ellyn.

Her eyes, hungry, drank him in.

‘El-’

He blinked. His sister was closing the fridge door.

‘Brun!’

‘As if I didn’t live here too.’ Dryly, ‘Talk of the devil, and he shall appear. Chad, stop catching flies and say hello to Susan please. It’s polite behaviour in most civilised countries. Especially when your friends walk all the way from town to see you.’

‘Hello.’

‘HM and Roger have gone to see the rental agent about the pipes. I’m off too. Library. Research. Ciao for now.’

Brun, smile hidden behind a fruit juice, sauntered from the kitchen.

A moment later the sound of bicycle wheels crunching through gravel drifted through the open window.

Chad sidled up to the kitchen table and sat down slowly, mind a prisoner of last night’s empty pages.

‘Juice.’ Ellyn set a glass before him with a thump. ‘Why did you tell your sister my name was Susan?’

Chad, shaking his head, sipped juice. ‘I don’t know. I’m sorry.’

‘Apology accepted.’ A chuckle. ‘Anyway, I’ve something to show you. It’s why I’m here.’

‘I’m all ears.’

‘Not here.’

‘Where then?’

‘You’ll see. Come on. There’s a bus in a few minutes.’

The bus was old, loud, unsteady on its wheels, and rocketed through the country lanes at an unfeasibly dangerous speed.

Chad, stomach churning, clung to a seatback handrail on the top deck. ‘I hate buses. They smell funny.’

‘It’s the people.’ Ellyn, hands free, stood at the front of the bus, windows wound down, face tilted to catch the wind. ‘The people smell, not the bus. Anticipation. Fear. Excitement, sadness, hope. It’s because they’re all going somewhere. All the bus smells of is oil and cheap upholstery. Everything else is people.’

‘I just feel like everyone’s watching me all the time. Hey, watch out!’

The bus, unswerving, crashed through low tree branches. Apple blossom exploded in through the window. Ellyn shrieked gleefully. ‘Summer snow!’

Blossom duned on the deck and seats. Chad, eyes jammed shut against the blizzard, heard distant bells.

‘Open some more windows, we need a through draught!’ Her voice, an eerie thread among the fog of pollen.

Chad, unsteady, forced his eyes open, reached for the nearest silver winding handle. Blossom swirled. The metal was icy cold.

‘It’s stuck!.’

‘Try another. Open some windows, Chad, I can’t see you!’

Chad, swaying, rose to his feet. The bus ran over a pothole and lurched. Chad lurched with it. His head banged painfully against the low ceiling.

Hands gripping the rails, he turned to the seat behind.

Everything from two seats back had vanished into a pink-white haze of blossom. Chad groped along the chair rail, feeling for the next window back, grabbed the winder.

‘This one’s no good either.’

‘Doesn’t make sense.’ Thinly, ‘If one works surely they all must?’

Chad groped his way into the aisle. The bus took a sharp corner and he clutched a rail. Ellyn squealed, distantly.

Chad took a step towards the back of the bus – and stopped suddenly. A shape loomed, then faded, obscured by billowing clouds of blossom.

He could hear a melody, heartbreakingly pure like melting ice.

‘Someone’s back there.’

‘Don’t be soft.’ Her voice, a distant shout on a foggy day. ‘The bus hasn’t stopped since we got on it. We’re the only passengers.’

‘Yes, and that’s odd isn’t it?’ His voice, dull, choked by blossom. ‘We must have come miles. What kind of bus doesn’t stop for requests?’

She said something but the words were gone, damped out by the thickening air to a meaningless mumble.

Sticky blossom coated his face and hair. Chad wiped it away. A shape loomed in the fluttering fog. Then another. Another.

Voices, muttering, swam distantly.

Chad thought, chalk me up for the funny farm, I’m seeing ghosts on a double decker in broad daylight.

The shapes were between him and the winding stairs. Whatever they were had them trapped. If trapped was what they wanted.

Chad, turning, hesitated. He could no longer see the front of the bus. Blossom, still churning in through the open window from thrashing branches, added to the pink and white blizzard.

‘Ellyn.’

Something moved, a shape, edges indistinct.

‘Ellyn, is that you?’

Voices, rising around him, muttering, meaningless.

Was it his imagination or were the seats receding from him, the aisle widening?

Every way he looked now, there were shapes in the gloom. Chad shivered, close to panic. It was cold. And his eyes were itching. As if they were vibrating. A humming sound drove through the plastic-coated handrails, along the bones of his arm and deep into his mind.

He blinked. The shapes were nearer.

He turned.

Nearer.

How come he never saw them moving?

He turned. Nearer, still faceless, voices indistinct.

Reaching for him.

‘Ellyn! Ellyn!’’

As if her name was a key to unlock the world, a sudden blizzard drove Chad to his knees in the aisle. Eyes closed against the force of wind, his face stung by blossom (how could blossom sting?) Chad grabbed the nearest seat and held on for dear life, fingers digging into the rough, timeworn fabric.

The force of the wind lessened suddenly.

A hand touched his shoulder.

Chad, eyes staring, jerked upright with a wild yell.

The bus was empty. No blossom. No shapes. No whispering voices.

The humming was gone, with it the melody.

Windows were open all down the bus. Fresh, warm summer air, scented with pollen drifted across the metal sills.

‘How – how did you get past me to open the windows?’

Her smile, sunshine, filled the deck.

The bus growled to a halt.

‘Come on, it’s our stop.’

The bus, grumbling, heaved itself off into the distance. Chad found himself standing by a crumbling stone bus shelter half buried in rhododendron bushes. The road curved away to either side, lost to sight almost immediately. Sunshine painted everything with a hot yellow sheen.

‘Where are we?’

‘The Crown.’ Her voice, warm in the silence. ‘It’s only half an hour from town as the bicycle flies.’

‘Half an hour? But we drove for miles.’

‘Well that’s buses for you.’ Ellyn, pushing aside undergrowth, eased her way off the road.

‘The march of progress.’ Chad, grumbling almost as badly as the bus, followed. ‘I didn’t know you could get there from here.’

‘My own special route.’ Six or seven yards from the road the trees closed overhead to form a tunnel blocked by a stile. Ellyn climbed nimbly over. ‘Come on. We’ll be on the top in no time.’

Chad, scaling the stile, found the ground less overgrown. ‘A track. It’s not on any map I’ve seen.’

‘I make my own maps, Chad.’ Her voice, dark as the greenest shadows. ‘You don’t live here as long as I have without something rubbing off.’

‘Lay on MacDuff. And damn'd be him that cries, “Enough!” ’

‘The boy knows his Shakespeare.’

Chad, grinning. ‘Exeunt Chad and Ellyn, stage left.’

After ten minutes hiking the ground began to slope sharply uphill. Ellyn took the slope without slowing down, despite the thickness of her duffle coat. Chad, dragging off his sweater, wondered how she managed to move

so fast and not melt. He followed, gasping.

The track narrowed and Chad found himself pushing aside more and more branches. The branches got thicker. Soon he was crawling. His breath came shorter and harder in the stifling heat. His hands acquired a patina of ground in dirt while a bonnet of leaf mulch stuck to his hair and even found its way down his collar. Branches large and small pressed tightly against his face and body. Brambles scratched his hands. Only the sight of Ellyn's scuffed boots worming their way into the undergrowth ahead of him lent him the strength to struggle on.

The contrast when suddenly his head and shoulders broke into daylight was shocking. Chad, gasping, wrenched himself from the grip of the undergrowth to lie panting on a grassy slope flecked with buttercups.

'Come along, don't dawdle.' Her voice, bright in the open air.

Chad, gathering his breath, climbed to his feet. Before him, no more than a hundred feet away, a crumbling monument. An ancient church built on a peak of rock, roofless, stumps of walls and foundations little more than grass-sheathed platforms pressed into the hillside.

The Crown.

Ellyn stood framed in a broken arch. Above her a bell tower tumbled jaggedly skyward. She waved him on with a vigorous movement that made her duffle coat flap madly.

Inside the archway, Chad found himself standing in what had once been a cloister garden. A grass coated checkerboard, flagstones still peeped occasionally from the grass. A line of broken stone columns marched away towards the main building. None stood higher than his knee. Moss coated the stone slabs with blue and grey and dull ochre, widening the cracks time had worn in the ancient structure. Insects hummed. Buttercups grew everywhere, cupping sunlight, painting the ground with a haze of thick yellow light.

Chad, breathless, moved to a stump of wall and perched on it, legs crossed. On the other side of the wall, the ground dropped away sharply. Spread out before them, the town. The second time in as many days he had seen it from such a high vantage point. Beyond the town, the sea coiled green and grey beneath a flawless blue sky, ringed by white cumulus clouds piling up on the distant horizon.

Somewhere a gull screeched.

Ellyn, moving easily through the grassy space, perched nearby on the flattish stump of a column.

‘They say this place was once a pagan worship site. Standing stones, blood sacrifice and everything. Hence the name. From the ground it might have been a crown upon a granite king. So they say.’

‘Really? Sacrifices? Would that be chickens or virgins?’ Musing. ‘Virgin chickens?’

Her voice, reproving, ‘Boys are so shallow.’

‘Guilty as charged.’ Chad, breath almost completely recovered, grinned. ‘What did you want to show me?’

‘Not one for the social niceties, are you?’ Her voice, light, drifted like pollen across the space between them. ‘How’s a girl to feel special if not for a little small talk?’

Chad, sighing, rose to lean against the low wall. ‘How many buildings was it you burned, again?’

Ellyn considered. ‘There are days when I’m not so sure I’m going to kiss you after all.’

‘Oh really.’

‘Look around.’ Her voice, suddenly heavy. ‘Tell me what you see.’

‘What do I see? I see broken walls, the hill, the town. More buttercups than you could shake a stick at. A cranky old gull mooching for a handout. What am I supposed to see?’

He waited. Ellyn answered with silence.

‘Oh come on, stop playing the eccentric local. If there’s something you want to show me tell me what it- oh!’

He jumped. Ellyn was suddenly beside him. Not looking at him, looking outwards, away from the hill, out at the sky, the distant ring of cloud.

Chad, frowning, felt a change in the mood. Suddenly the heat of the sun was cloying, and the smell of brambles and rhododendron clogged his

nostrils, recalling overgrown pathways in ancient woods instead of open hilltops under wide, flawless skies.

‘How did you get past me on the bus?’

‘What?’

Surprise. Had he caught her off guard?

‘You wanted small talk. Here’s some for you then: on the bus, remember? You were at the front, I was half way down. I couldn’t get the windows open. Then the blossom blew in, a real storm, and... well, something happened. I seemed to lose you, somehow. But I did see something. Several somethings. Shapes. And I heard people whispering. I shouted but you didn’t hear me. Then the blossom blew away and all the windows were open. There was no-one except us on the bus. But somehow you’d got past me in the aisle to open the windows. How did you do that without me feeling or seeing you do it? To tell you the truth, I was scared. Did you bring me out today just to scare me?’

‘Not just to scare you.’ Her voice, painting the bright hilltop with sombre tones.

‘What then?’ His voice, sharp with sudden anger.

‘Look at the clouds.’

‘For goodness, sake!’

‘Chad, please!’

‘White and fluffy, just like clouds should be. So?’

‘Now look at these,’ Ellyn, reaching into her pocket, pulled out a sheaf of glossy paper.

‘Photographs. So?’

‘The film came back this morning. I took this one yesterday.’

‘The sky. Highly artistic.’

‘Not the sky. The clouds.’

‘The inventor of the Box Browning would be proud.’

‘Chad concentrate!’

‘Alright, alright, hold your horses. I’m looking.’

‘Look, Chad. This is serious. I’ve been up here every day for a week. It took me a couple of days to notice and then I got a camera, one of those disposables from the chemist. I’ve been shooting pictures for almost a week. Look - you can see the clock on the town hall. Different times, different days. And the weathercock on the church is pointing in different directions, moving with the wind.’

‘And the point of this photographic extravaganza is... what exactly?’

‘Look at the clouds, Chad.’

She held the photographs up to the horizon.

‘Look at the clouds!’

‘Yes, I saw, very pretty, I’m- oh!’

The day turned cold. Something snatched at his breath. Something hummed distantly, a low-flying plane or a faulty lawnmower. Chad poked a finger into his ear but the sound did not diminish.

‘You see it? You can, can’t you? I’m not imagining it!’

He thought, this is insane.

‘It can’t be true.’

‘It’s true alright. I photographed it – four days running.’

‘But – it’s absurd! Clouds don’t do that.’

‘These clouds do. Look at the pictures, Chad. Pictures don’t lie. Since the day you found the music box those clouds haven’t changed shape or size. They’re just sitting out there on the horizon, like a wall around the world. And that’s impossible, isn’t it?’

Chapter 7

Chad, shivering, sat on the grass and pulled his knees up to his chest, wrapping his arms around them. He rocked gently back and forth.

The ruined church lay a little off to his left, quite still in the sunlight, a decaying snapshot of time gone by. Ellyn's polaroids lay in a half-circle on the grass before him, also perfectly still as if they, like the clouds they depicted, massed too much for the blustery hilltop wind to move.

A gull flapped briefly around the tower, breaking the stillness of the moment. Chad, eyes drawn by the movement, stood suddenly.

'Ellyn!'

He pointed.

'What?'

'In the tower window. Someone's there, someone's watching us.'

Ellyn, perched upon the mossy stub of stone, looked up, eyes hardly narrowed against the bright sunshine. 'I can't see anything.'

'It's just a shadow. Let your eyes get accustomed to the dark.'

'I can't see anything.'

'Don't look. Listen.'

Wind, muttering and moaning through old stonework, shifted restlessly across the hilltop.

'Can't you hear? A sound like... I don't know, people shouting at the end of a long tunnel.'

Ellyn answered with silence.

‘I did see someone, I know I did.’ Chad, sticky with heat, flapped his arms gently in the breeze.

‘It’s the sun. Spots before your eyes.’

‘Don’t be clever. I thought I heard footsteps, too.’

‘Spots before your ears then.’

‘Chad!’

‘There’s no-one there now.’

‘I’m not so sure, you know. That ruin is pretty big when you get right up close to it. Anything could be hiding in there. What’s the tower – two stories? Three? It looks pretty solid. I’m going to take a look.’

‘I don’t think that’s wise.’ Her voice, a shadow in the sunlight.

‘What, trespassers will be shot, you mean?’ Chad, shrugging, stumped angrily across the grass. ‘Show me the signs!’

‘Chad, wait.’ Ellyn, gathering polaroids, scrambled after him. ‘I’ll come with you. Safer with two.’

‘No, it’s OK. You stay here. The way things have been lately I may need someone to drag me out by the scruff of my neck.’

‘You’re thinking of the bus.’

‘Well, it was weird, wasn’t it? And it’s not the only thing. Your clouds, our pipes, the music box that plays music with no disks. Brun doing a moody on me for the first time in recorded human history... something tells me scoping out a derelict church is going to be a snip compared to that. Anyway, if I’m not back in five, you know what to do.’

‘Send in the marines? Come myself and bring the band-aids? Run home and fetch daddy?’ Her voice, raised a notch, buzzing angrily in the warm day. ‘You better think again. And not like a boy either.’

‘I don’t know whether to laugh or cry, with you.’ Chad, turning, decided on a grin. ‘I did see someone, you know.’

Ellyn, still as any wall in her gently flapping duffle, considered silently.

‘Don’t you trust me?’

‘Trust is not an issue, Chad.’

‘Well what on Earth is the issue then?’

‘The church is not safe. For others, maybe, kids, the townsfolk, normal people. Not for you. Not now.’

Chad, tired, rubbed his eyes. ‘Nothing you say makes sense.’

‘That depends on your perspective.’

‘What are we, little green men? I am normal! You’re normal too, though heaven knows you try not to be.’ He took a step towards her, away from the church. ‘This has been a very odd holiday so far.’

She moved then, and a single step seemed to carry her across the intervening space without her feet ever touching the overgrown flagstones.

Her fingers, cupping his cheek, warm and dry.

‘You’re important, Chad. Can’t you see that?’

‘Everyone thinks they’re the most important person in the world.’ His voice, trembling. ‘That’s just a function of the human ego. We all have a worldview, and we’re smack in the middle of it, the most important thing in our little microcosms.’

Her voice, a whisper. ‘But what if we really were the most important person in the world? What then?’

‘Ellyn-’

‘What would the world think of that?’

‘I don’t-’

Her fingers moved to his lips. Chad fell silent. The hillside seemed to expand and contract at the same time, like a clever shot in a movie, the grass standing out in super-realistic detail. A dragonfly drifted between them, frozen by the moment, wings like jewels and every brushstroke hair quivering with life.

‘The world might not like it. You’re young after all, and the world is old. The world doesn’t like new things, Chad. New things are important. Maybe the world has an inflated sense of it’s own importance, maybe it gets jealous. Maybe it wants to hurt you, even destroy you. Then the old places in the world, the ancient cliffs and caves and trees, the oldest of stone walls and ideas... they’d act for the world, wouldn’t they? Even our parents. They’re older than us aren’t they?’

He thought, Roger! Hjelle Miyake!

His cheek burned at the touch of her skin.

‘Or music, say.’ Her voice, burning too. ‘What’s older than music, Chad? Not the wheel. Not fire. Only us. Only people. And some might even argue that.’

His hand, lifting slowly to clasp hers; her face, slipping out of focus as the dragonfly, pivoting on time-lapse wings, peered at each of them in turn with gleaming compound eyes.

‘Music is old, Chad.’

A hundred spinning Chads and Ellyns peered eerily back at him from the dragonfly’s expressionless eyes.

‘The world can use it against us.’

Time stuttered.

Dragonfly wings became a flip-pad of still images, a gossamer figure of eight. Clickclick. Clickclick. The sound they made, the hum of distant machinery.

Chad’s voice bubbled past his lips, a question, a protestation. The words made no sense. Or sound. The scent of apple blossom filled the space between them. The world lurched like an old double-decker.

Cold needles threading warm afternoon, a heartbreaking melody, like distant bells or melting ice.

Chad, shivering, saw something move in the crumbling arch of the church. A figure, clothed in shadows, glowing with sun-stained darkness.

Voices whispered across the hilltop.

Chad thought, he's a giant!

'Hey you leave my brother alone!'

A girl's voice.

Brun, her words a shocking intrusion into the eerie tableau.

With her voice, a shudder of dandelion seeds burst in the wind.

The humming sound, the ice-melody, all snapped off, as if by a switch.

Chad blinked; the dragonfly was gone.

'Brun- what-?'

But his sister wasn't listening. Face burning, she marched up to Ellyn and wrenched at her shoulder. The stockier girl turned, hearing aid flung loose from one ear to fall in the long grass among flaming buttercups. Clutching glasses, chin lowered, Ellyn glared at Brun as if she were a wild animal to be confronted.

A moment hung between them. Brun scowled. Chad had never seen her so angry.

Ellyn, her voice thick and scratchy, said, 'I didn't peg you for the jealous type.'

Brun bent slowly, eyes never leaving Ellyn's, to scoop wire and softly moulded plastic from the grass. 'I'm sorry about your hearing aid. But don't touch my brother again.'

Fitting shell and wire to ear, Ellyn merely smiled.

Chad, blinking, pointed with a leaden arm to the crumbling archway. 'Someone,' he said, 'In the church. Told you. Watching us.'

Brun looked at him then with a savage intensity.

'Idiot.'

Chad reeled from the venom in her voice. With a sudden movement Brun took a small make-up mirror from her pocket and held it up in front of his face.

'Look what she did to you.'

Chad blinked stupidly.

A bruise hung across his cheek, sullen and distinctive. Four fingers and a thumb. Ellyn's hand.

'But-'

'Shut up.'

The mirror vanished as Brun returned her attention to Ellyn. 'I was in the library today, researching my story, trolling the local rag for inspiration. You know what I found?'

Ellyn said nothing.

'That's right, "Susan." Or should I say "Ellyn?" I know what you did. I know how many people died. If you come near my brother again, there'll be police involved.'

Ellyn glanced sideways at Chad. Her voice, a gentle warning, 'Brun's older, Chad. Your older sister. Never forget that in time to come.'

'Brun's right, Ellyn, you should leave now.' A new voice rang authoritatively. A young man walked across the hilltop towards them, angular face framed between the girls'.

'Vincent.' Chad scowled.

'He was helping me at the library.'

'I bet he was.'

'Chad don't be angry. All we wanted to do was-'

'You know-' Chad's voice broke momentarily. 'You know, I really think I've had quite enough of this juvenile delinquency. I'm quite old enough to decide what to do and who to do it with, thank you very much!'

A surprised moment hung between them.

Chad, calming, added 'I saw someone in the church. I think they were watching us. I'm going to find out. Anyone feel like helping?'

At the crumbling archway, he turned. Brun and Vincent were caught in an exchange of incredulous looks while Ellyn was merely smiling

minutely, as if his actions were the answer to a question only she could pose.

Chad, irritated, entered the church.

Cold air, pushing aside warm, drifted across peeling stone. A single shaft of sunlight punched in through a high arched window. Shreds of leaded glass stained the light with deep water blues and greens. The light splashed across time-smoothed stone, clinging moss, a tidal wave of brambles.

Chad, lip curled, forced a path into the damp green riot.

Wooden pews, rotting to stubs, smothered in mould and mushrooms, folded softly aside at his touch as he pushed between them.

He thought, damp cardboard. Like a dolls house left out in the rain.

Somewhere behind him he could hear voices. Vincent and Brun. Where was Ellyn?

He moved deeper into the nave, circling the smashed walls, the trunks of fluted columns. Overhead the sky, ripped by brambles, a jigsaw of blue and yellow, burned out to white as his eyes adjusted to the gloom.

Searching, he found no signs of a watcher. No footprints, no gaps in the bramble.

He remained still for several minutes, listening for a telltale sound, a voice or whisper. He heard nothing beyond the distant mutter of his sister and Vincent.

The voice faded and silence fell.

A musty smell threaded the ruin.

He thought, there's something in the church.

Chad, turning, felt a rush of cold air, as if someone had moved nearby.

'Who's there? Brun? Vincent? Ellyn, is that you?'

Nothing. No, wait. He could hear something. A tiny sound in the vaulted silence. Something like... oh, the sigh of the sea in an old shell... or a giant crowd yelling at the end of a long tunnel, reduced to a whisper by distance.

Chad, shaking his head, fought to clear his senses. He felt something like an electric current pass through him: strange, uncomfortable, like broken machinery humming far off across a distant horizon.

Yes. Yes, that was it!

He had it now.

Something nearby was... something nearby was breathing.

Chad groped wildly in the gloom for stone. Walls and columns seemed to have disappeared. All he felt was the hooked tug of bramble against his skin. The stink of damp suddenly pushed aside by the clinging scent of apple blossom.

The breathing was getting louder.

Not louder – nearer.

Chad, turning, peered into every dark corner.

'I've been taking karate lessons ever since I was four. I may not be able to knock a brick in half with my forehead but if I hit you it'll leave a monster bruise.'

The breathing increased.

'I won't go for the body. Not like they teach you. I'll aim for the face. I'll black your eye or break your nose. The police will find you in five minutes flat.'

A liquid sound mixed in with the breathing, a hungry gurgle.

Chad, jaw set, braced himself for an impact he knew could be only seconds away.

'Touch me and my dad, my sister and all my friends will kick your ass so far into the middle of next week you'll need a time machine to find it.'

Chad, groping for the safety of a wall or column, found only brambles.

The breathing became a rush of air, a roar like a torn plane. The roar was somehow squeezed, became a thin screech of air that set his teeth on edge.

He felt – something – sucking at him. He felt weak, drained.

He thought, a hole. Someone's torn a hole in the world and now everything's leaking out.

A hand, reaching out from the brambles, closed over his arm.

Chad yelped in surprise.

The hand was dark and grimy with broken fingernails, bare fingers webbed by old scars, the rough palm gloved in stinking leather crusted with blood.

The index finger held a ring, silver, finely wrought, a dragon, clawed wings spread.

Hand and ring were cold. Like ice, or a piece of rock which, drifting through space for eternity, sucked heat and life from any living world it touched.

Chad struggled.

The hand convulsed. Broken nails drew blood.

A voice came from the brambles, the words distorted, meaningless, like someone yelling at the other end of a long tunnel.

Chad, struck by a sudden clarity, thought, they've made a hole in the world, but it's not big enough to get through. Not yet. Whoever's on the other side can't get out. They need me to pull them clear.

Ice clogging his veins, pain twisted up his arm.

Chad, stomach knotting, resisted the urge to bolt.

He thought, stay calm. Think it through. They don't have enough leverage to get through on their own. If I back away now I'll pull them with me, out of their world into mine. Heaven knows what they'll do then. If I stand still they won't be able to use me to get through.

He froze.

The hand groped and clutched, the arm beyond gone to gloom and the jagged shadow of brambles.

Air shrieked, sucked past him into the brambles, whose coiled stems vibrated like whips. A humming sound rose in his ears like distant machinery. Apple blossom scent forced its way into his nostrils until he choked.

Chad, heart pounding, held perfectly still.

Nails dug harder into his arm. Chad, bleeding, bit his lip to stop himself crying out.

They're only hurting you to make you run away. Then they can get through.

Long minutes passed. Chad, screaming inside, did not move. Pain shuddered up his arm, pinpricks of static. A crackling sound like burning fat fizzled in the back of his eyes. Chad, motionless, waited. Eventually the grip on his arm tightened once, agonisingly, then loosened as if to seek better purchase.

Chad, yelling, wrenched himself free.

'Hah! Show you!'

He ran.

Air sucked and shrieked.

He ran.

Brambles clutched and stone smashed his hands and knees.

He ran.

Outside the church, panting, he raced blazing buttercups to a solitary figure.

'Vincent! Holy cow! There's someone in the church! Didn't you hear the screeching? Come on, Vincent, he's a maniac. Grab Brun and Ellyn and let's get out of here!'

Vincent, dark and thin, tilted his face to examine Chad quizzically. 'Hey Chad. Where have you been? And what's all this about screaming?'

'You didn't hear it? Like an animal. Then someone grabbed my arm! Where are the others?'

‘Ellyn’s gone. Didn’t like the company you keep.’ His voice, hard edged. ‘Where have you been Chad? You’ve been gone hours. Brun was worried sick.’

‘Where is she?’

‘In the church of course. She went in to find you.’

Chad turned, mind a prisoner of the crumbling building.

Ellyn spoke in his head. The world doesn’t like new things, Chad. New things are important. Maybe the world gets jealous. Maybe it wants to hurt you, even destroy you. Then the old places in the world, the oldest of stone walls and ideas, they’d act for the world, wouldn’t they?

‘We have to go in after her.’

Vincent was already running across the grass. ‘Too right, mate. If there’s some lunatic in there she might be in danger.’

Chad, fear smashed aside by a frenzy of anger, charged the church as if it were a living thing, yelling at the top of his lungs.

‘Brun! Brun!!’

‘Hey Chadski, what’s all the kafuffle?’

Her voice, soft, calm, faintly amused.

Chad and Vincent turned as one.

‘Brun!’

She was there, leaning nonchalantly at a junction of moss softened walls, sea horizon curling at her back, softened by distance, framed in the crumbling stone arch. She took a step towards them, and for a second the moss-stained wall seemed to cling to her skin. Then it let go, reluctantly, and Brun, unaware, drifted elegantly across sun-splashed buttercups like a figure in a renaissance painting.

Chad, falling, felt soft, scratchy grass against his legs and hands. Heart hammering against his ribs, he stuttered.

‘Are you-’

‘Fine, of course. Why wouldn’t I be?’

‘The church-’

‘Empty of course.’

‘-the brambles-’

‘Some moss, that’s all. A few old pews rotting away in the shadows. Chad, are you feeling OK?’

Brun, kneeling beside him, touched a cool hand to his brow. ‘You look like you’ve been dragged through a hedge backwards. Stay away from Ellyn, Chad. She’s no good for you.’

Chad gulping air, found hiccups turning to short barks of laughter.

‘Dragged through a hedge-! If only you knew-’

‘Knew what?’

‘Never mind. We’re out. Right now, that’s good enough for me.’

Chad, collapsing further, stretched out on the grass, arms out flung, face tilted up to the comforting sun.

Brun laughed, her voice threading sunlight, like distant bells or melting ice.

‘Anyway, look what I found.’

Chad, squinting, looked up at his sister.

Brun, lifting her hand, cupped fragments of sunlight.

‘Isn’t it beautiful? I found it in the tower. I’m going to put it in my story.’

A necklace of gold, gossamer links threading amber tears.

Vincent grinned. ‘Allow me.’

Brun, turning, let Vincent clasp the necklace around her throat.

‘Very elegant.’

‘Thank you!’

Her face, framed in golden summer.

‘What do you think Chad?’

‘Fantastic, naturally. I bet it’s worth a fortune.’

‘Oh I’m not giving it away to some museum.’

Chad, tiring of the conversation, clambered to his feet.

‘You might not have any choice. There are laws about treasure trove, you know. That looks pretty old to me.’

Brun, clutching the necklace, frowned.

Chad frowned too.

As her fingers touched the amber tears, there came a sound like distant bells or melting ice. Brun’s voice lifted without thought to harmonise. A heartbreaking melody.

One he’d first heard when they’d found the Symphonion.

Chapter 8

‘Here you go then. Home sweet home.’

Vincent, driving a dust grey Zephyr Zodiac, dropped Brun and Chad at the farm.

‘Thanks for the ride!’ Brun, leaning sideways in the front passenger seat, brushed her lips against the driver’s cheek.

Chad, already opening the rear passenger door, scowled. He jumped from the car.

Brun, lingering in summer twilight, asked, ‘D’you want to come in? Maybe the pipes are OK now and we can all have tea.’

‘OK, yeah, that’d be-’

The Zephyr suddenly gulped violently.

‘Oops. Maybe not, then. The car’s been playing up a bit recently. Wouldn’t want to stall all the way out here.’ Tapping the dashboard, ‘Garage in the morning, for you, my old sunbeam.’ To Brun, ‘Take a rain check?’

‘If I must.’ Smiling.

Chad rolled his eyes and headed up to the house. There was an envelope pinned to the front door. Grabbing it, he unlocked the door and pushed it open.

The house was still, shrouded in darkness.

‘Dad! HM!’

Silence.

‘Dad?’

Chad, blinking sunset spots from his eyes, found one remained, a red eye blinking back at him from the gloom.

He thought, at least they’ve left a message.

Frowning, Chad groped for the light switch. Outside, the Zodiac engine coughed into life and receded into the evening. Footsteps on the stone path announced his sister’s arrival.

‘No-one home?’

‘Well spotted that girl. There was a note on the door, though. And a message on the machine. Pound to a penny they’re whooping it up in the city. Theatre, movie, all night dancing, you know Dad – party animal.’

Brun, shrugging, said, ‘It’ll be the irresistible lure of saveloy and chips if you ask me. What’s the note say?’

‘Get the light and I’ll tell you.’

Her fingers, closing the switch. A flash and a pop.

Glass, like snow, pattered on the hall carpet.

‘Wretched thing! Now we’ll need a dustpan and brush.’

‘They’re under the sink in the kitchen. I’ll get them.’

Chad, returning with the dustpan and brush, scraped glass from the floor. ‘Hey, the glass is cold. You’d have thought it would have been – ouch!’

‘What is it? Cut yourself?’

‘No. The glass stuck to my fingers. It’s freezing. Like ice!’

Brun laughed. ‘Don’t be silly. Light bulbs are full of gas, not water.’

‘You don’t have to tell me. It’s still frozen though. Here, see for yourself.’

Sunlight, entering the kitchen almost horizontally through leaded windows, was just bright enough for them to examine the contents of the dustpan. The curved glass fragments were dusted with frost.

‘Look!’

Chad, breathing on the fragments, watched as the white rime melted away.

‘Weird. Still... Stranger things have happened at sea.’ Scooping up the dustpan, Brun scraped broken glass into the pedal bin.

‘Talking of strange and weird – how come you were so strange and weird today? To Ellyn I mean.’

‘I was being neither strange nor weird. I was protecting you.’

‘Ellyn’s my friend. You had a fight. That’s hardly protecting me.’

Brun sat down at the kitchen table. Her voice, sombre, hung in the air, a curtain of smoke between them. ‘The library keeps newspapers, Chad. There are things about Ellyn you don’t know.’

‘I know she burned down a store in town.’

‘That’s just the tip of the iceberg.’

‘Tell me then.’

‘I don’t know if I can trust you. To believe me, I mean.’

‘For crying out loud!’

‘I’m sorry, Chad. It’s clear you’ve a soft spot for her. I’m just not sure she’s good for you that’s all.’

‘Well, thanks, Brun. You’ve just helped me redefine the word condescending.’

‘Don’t let’s argue. You know I think the world of you. What’s in the note, anyway?’

It lay unopened and forgotten on the kitchen table. Chad unfolded the paper and smoothed it out.

Dear All. (4.30.)

Popped in to cadge a bucket of drinking water but you’re out. Having a little fuss and bother with our pipes - frozen up! Pop over if you get a half a mo’.

‘Oh.’ Brun, her voice sounding puzzled and slightly worried. ‘I thought it’d be from Dad and HM.’

‘Me too. I wonder where they are.’

‘They can’t have been at the Rental Agency all day. Maybe they decided to stay out. There’re loads of places they could go.’

‘And not tell their son and heir? That’s not like them.’

Brun frowned. ‘Wait a minute. What about the ansafone? There was a message, remember? Before the light bulb popped its clogs.’

‘I do, as a matter of fact. Shall we?’

Chad, pensive, followed Brun back into the hallway. A force, like gravity, a strange attractor, tugged at him briefly as they passed the lounge door. He hesitated, wanting to open the door and go in but there was no sound from the room. Shaking his head he scooted along the hall and caught up with Brun at the ansafone.

Her finger hovered above the playback button.

Chad almost spoke then. Something made him want to knock her hand aside and hit erase without listening to the recording, or better yet simply yank the plug from the wall. A dreadful feeling of butterflies suddenly overwhelmed him. His stomach churned as if the world had slipped unnoticed from beneath him and now he was falling endlessly to some cold and distant plane.

He waited a moment too long and her finger fell. He watched with fascination as the skin around her knuckle wrinkled slightly with the impact. The ansafone clicked on. You have one new message.

The tape breathed softly.

‘Oh.’ Brun, puzzled, jiggled buttons. ‘There’s nothing there. Maybe they couldn’t get through or something. I’ll erase it. Maybe they’ll call back-’

‘No, wait!’ Chad, eyes narrowed, strained to hear something that tugged at the farthest reaches of hearing.

‘Turn it up. The volume. Turn it up to full.’

Brun, shrugging, rolled her fingertip along the knurled wheel.

‘There! Can’t you hear it? Buried down among the tape noise. Listen!’

Chad, straining, heard distant bells, a heart wrenching melody like melting ice.

Brun’s eyes locked on to his.

‘I can’t hear anything, Chad. There’s nothing there.’

‘You’re wrong. I can hear music. Like the music we heard when we found the Symphonion. I’ve been hearing it for days. Don’t you think that’s weird? A music box playing without disks? Don’t erase that message, Brun. I want to tape it off.’

‘Chad-’

‘No Brun! Leave it. I want to keep that message.’

‘OK, no need to shout. Here. I’ll store it for you.’

‘Don’t bother. Can I borrow your dictaphone?’

‘Alright. It’s in my room, on the dresser.’

‘You get it.’

A moment hung between them. Chad, sensing growing hostility from his sister, smiled quickly. ‘I just want to listen to it again, that’s all.’

Brun ran upstairs. Chad crouched beside the ansafone and stared into the red light, unblinking now the message had been stored. It looked like a red eye staring at him from hooked gorse shadows.

He pushed the playback button.

Tape breathed softly.

Chad, resting his finger on the volume wheel, rolled it back and forth slowly. He listened intently to the noise issuing from the tiny speaker. Butterflies churned in his stomach. He took a breath. Rolled the wheel. Tape breathed distant bells. The wheel rolled. A melody. Bells. Melting ice. Rolled again, minutely. Now there was a new sound. He could hear

words, like people shouting at the end of a long tunnel.

Chad shivered. Voices. The same voices I heard this afternoon on the bus and in the church.

'Chad, are you there?' Brun, her voice drifting along passage and trickling down stairs. 'I can't find my dictaphone. I'm sure I put it here yesterday but it's gone. Have you moved it?'

'You're the writer!' Irritation.

'Alright! Maybe HM was using it for her thesis. I'll keep looking.'

'Great.'

Chad, attention captured by the ansafone, glared back into the gleaming red eye, willing the sounds that scratched at the very threshold of perception to come clear, to finally make sense. Like some half remembered dream or ancient memory long forgotten. Or no… like someone else's memories, struggling to make themselves known. Words in a voice as familiar and alien as your own voice when you hear it played back from a tape recorder. Something completely you… and yet somehow not you at all.

He rolled the wheel.

Bells. Ice. Melody. Bells.

Rolled again.

Voices.

Rolled.

Melody.

Rolled. Rolled. Rolled.

Chad, leaning closer, his knees creaking as he crouched, breath coming faster and shorter as tension built walls of pain in his thighs and calves.

The ansafone loomed, tape wheels rolling behind the smoked-glass lid. The machine whirred. It hummed.

Voices.

He thought, in my wealth shall no man delight.

His finger, moving gently, brushed the stop button.

Click.

Agonising silence stabbed deep into his ears.

Chad, gasping, stood up, rubbing pins and needles from his legs. A cry of pain balanced itself on his lips. How long had he been crouched there? He wobbled. Took a few unsteady steps, thumping his legs to get the feeling back.

'Brun! Did you find the dictaphone yet?'

From upstairs, only silence.

Chad, rubbing his eyes, sighed.

Draped in shadows, the hall table hung suspended in a void. Outside the sun must be long gone. Easing his way past the hall table and along the passage, Chad felt for the brass handle on the lounge door.

'Ouch!'

Fingertips prickled as they brushed cold metal.

He thought, static charge. I must have picked it up from the

(voices)

ansafone.

The world slipped sideways. A buzzing sound filled his ears.

Chad, tugging his hand free from the sticky metal, thought, feels like thorns in the church. Thorns on brambles no-one else can see. Or a hand that doesn't want to let go.

Sucking his fingers, Chad eased the door open with his knee. He groped for the light switch as the solid oak thumped softly into the wall. The lounge curtains were open, the sky beyond an inky blue-black, stained even darker by moss-cloud trees. The room was draped in shadows, dispelled in a moment as his fingers closed around the light switch.

The Symphonion sat on the lounge table, opposite the piano, beneath a

heavily framed picture depicting children playing on a frozen river. It glowed in the warm electric light as if in bright sunshine. A nimbus of light hung around it like a cloud, or the sun through fogged spectacles. The light struck sparks from its burnished lacquer work, silver clasps and engraved winding socket.

Chad, attention caught, listened intently for sounds from upstairs.

'Brun?'

Nothing.

'Hey Brun, did you find it yet?'

Only silence.

His words hung dead still in the room, a ship's sails and no breath of wind to move them. No answer from upstairs. It was as if his voice hadn't even made it out of the doorway. As if it was trapped here, in the fog of light surrounding the Symphonion. As if the music box was somehow unwilling to let any other sounds but those made by itself escape into the world.

Chad took a long breath, exhaled silently. His hand fell from the light switch.

He took a step into the room.

A step towards the Symphonion.

The step became one, two, many. Before he quite realised what had happened, Chad had crossed the floor, circling the pouffe, the lounger and the piano stool, orbit decaying towards the lounge table and the strange attractor staggering upwards in lacquered gothic tiers into the warm electric light.

Chad blinked.

Objects in the room seemed somehow unclear, as if glimpsed through steamed up glass. Their edges became softened, almost hazy, while the Symphonion stood out even more sharply by comparison. He thought, as if the music box were somehow absorbing the shape of other objects in the room to enhance its own definition.

Chad held his hand out before him. The edges of his fingers were hazy too, burned out in the light from the Symphonion. He thought he could see ghost-shapes in the flesh; bones, the joints of his fingers, a living X-ray.

The movement of his hand continued naturally into a stretch and then a reach. His fingers brushed the polished lacquer work. The wooden inlay was superb, maple and oak edges mating perfectly with mahogany, birch and cedar, each perfect angle and flawless curve picked out in warm electric light.

He thought, where's the crumbling wreck we bought from junk shop?

The words drifted aimlessly, windswept blossom, through his mind.

A smile crawled resentfully across his face.

Beautiful.

The lacquer was smooth, cold, and seemed to tremble slightly at the touch of his fingers. The silver clasp popped open at his touch. Chad, sensing overwhelming joy, pushed up the lid.

It opened smoothly, lighter than he expected, like lifting air. The simple observation drove him to smile more widely. Energy seemed to rush along his arm, spreading a warm tingle, like pins and needles, across his chest and back. Inside shadows swirled, a slow whirlpool, unfolding as the lid eased open to spill warm light into the interior.

Here too the lacquer work showed how busy Brun had been. The image of the girl standing by the high falls was even clearer now, ancient cigarette burns seeming to shrink even as he watched, caught in some trick of the shifting light as the lid opened to its full extent.

He thought, she's beautiful.

Her eyes, cupping almond light, touched his and the impact almost made him cry out.

He leaned closer, pulled into the box, melting into the light, and music played just for him. A heart wrenching melody like distant bells or melting ice.

His heart sang too, sympathetic resonance like a wine glass near the point of shattering.

Her eyes filled him with gold.

Tumbling, lost in her, wanting to be lost, Chad cried out at last. His voice, a wordless groan of love and panic.

Balance gone, body a pincushion of nerve impulses, Chad fell. Arms windmilling, a numb hand struck something hard with a painless shock.

A perfect E natural chord blew out of the lounge piano, the rich harmonics jagged and ugly beside the glorious Symphonion.

The piano chord slashed into his mind, badly wielded kitchen knives.

Chad, screaming, reeled in pain.

Slammed both hands against the keyboard.

Balanced ivory struck agonising notes like sparks of silver fire in the solar haze of the Symphonion.

Chad, feeling golden light drain from his mind, hammered the piano.

‘Get out of my head!’

‘I’m Chad! I’m me!’

‘You can’t come in!

The words an insane arpeggio.

The Symphonion blazed, incandescent.

‘What have you done with Dad and Hjelle Miyake?!’

The scent of apple blossom filled the room. The world slipped sideways like a lurching bus. The words hung in the air around him, trapped in the gravity well of the Symphonion, orbiting lower and faster, a whirlpool of sound like people screaming at the end of a long tunnel, the sound rising to an ear shattering hum that drilled so far into his head he felt it must surely burst.

IN MY WEALTH SHALL NO MAN DELIGHT!

... DELIGHT!

... SHALL NO MAN DELIGHT!

Chad, slamming fists and elbows madly against the piano screamed wordlessly into impossible sunlight.

GET OUT OF MY HEAD!

GET OUT OF MY HEAD RIGHT NOW!

GET OUT YOU'RE NOT REAL NOT REAL!

But Chad, shrieking, knew it was real. As real as the hand in the church, as real as the bruise on his arm from its grip. Knew he was trapped with no possibility of escape, and that the respite offered by the piano was no sanctuary, just a pianissimo lull in the Symphonion's attack.

The eye of the storm.

A single moment of perfect calm, the momentary relief from pain luring him in...

'Chad! What on earth-'

Brun's voice, crystal clear in the shrieking maelstrom of golden voices.

Darkness.

Silence.

Sudden, complete.

'Brun! God!'

Chad, exhausted, fell as if pole-axed.

'Didn't you hear it? A storm of voices.'

'Hear it? You bet I heard it! Chad, have you gone mad? Look what you've done to the piano! Dad and HM will have to pay for it-'

Chad, pushing himself to his knees by sheer force of will, uttered jagged words. 'Shut up Brun! Forget the piano. It's not important. Dad and HM aren't coming back. It's got them. It's got them somewhere. I know it.'

Her hands, lifting him effortlessly.

'Chad, I don't-'

‘Don’t touch me!’

‘I’m-’

‘I opened the box, Brun! The Symphonion. That girl is like a siren. I don’t know how, but she’s real, Brun. As real as you or me or the stars in the sky. She called to me. Touched me. Told me she loved me. She nearly got me, too. I only got away by the skin of my teeth. I could be in there now. Part of the magic. I wanted it, Brun. Just for a second. I wanted it like nothing on earth. I wanted it even more than I wanted mum back.’

‘Chad, Chad, calm down. I can see you’re upset-’

‘Upset? Upset! It’s a force of nature. Like a black hole sucking in everything around it and crushing it out of existence. It wants to put the world somewhere we can’t find it! You wait, Brun, you wait just another few days. Then it’ll be strong enough so that nothing can escape.’

Her expression, a mixture of sympathy and puzzlement, touched him at last. A single tear brushed the corner of her eye. And as quickly as that, he had it. The most terrifying image of all. Chad, grabbing Brun, wrenched her around and thrust her face towards the open Symphonion.

‘Chad!’

Her voice, a squeal of alarm.

‘Oh don’t worry. I have a very strong feeling it won’t hurt you. Now look!’

At a girl of mahogany and maple, birch and cedar, a girl now impossibly whole, and beautiful, like the details of her dress and sandals, the single clasp upon her hair.

The necklace at her throat.

Gold threading eighteen amber tears shining like tiny pieces of sun.

Brun’s hand lifted to her neck, the necklace there a mirror to that depicted upon the Symphonion.

‘That artwork is a hundred years old if it’s a day. You only found that necklace today. How did it know, Brun? How did it know!’

Chapter 9

‘Now run that by me again. You’d like to report your parents missing? That makes a change, I must say.’

Chad, eye to eye with the policeman, tried to stay calm. Pinned by the officer’s impassive gaze it was hard not to feel like a stupid kid caught out in a prank.

He had never been in a police station before. He was surprised at how nice it smelled. The duty officer seemed friendly enough if a bit condescending. Brun was irritated. Chad could see she wanted to jump feet first into the conversation, short circuit the necessary procedures and paperwork. But Chad felt he could put up with a put down if it helped get Roger and HM back.

‘That’s right, Sergeant...’

‘Oh just Ron’ll do. We don’t stand on ceremony here.’

Chad tried to relax. It wasn’t as if he’d done anything wrong. What was it about the small, almost homely interior of the mid-town Police Station that made him feel so intimidated? Not the summer posies in neat baskets lining each windowsill, that was certain, or the scuffed and obviously second-hand leather sofa that served as the single item of furniture in the tiny reception room.

‘Your Mum’s name isn’t Susan I suppose?’

Chad felt suddenly cold.

‘What makes you say that?’

The officer waved a stack of light blue forms. ‘This lot here. Eighteen disappearances reported in the last 24 hours within a ten mile radius. All

named Susan. Thought it was a joke. Fax machine's been full steam ahead all morning. Honestly, I was on the verge of calling the main branch and giving old Mackie there an ear full for wasting my time on a stupid joke when you two turned up.'

Chad, controlling his unease, glanced sideways at his sister. Brun, also clearly uncomfortable though for a different reason, agitated silently. She hadn't wanted to come to town this morning, had told him she'd rather work on her story. Her placid indifference to their parents' whereabouts made Chad want to scream. Instead he'd stayed calm, and with a great effort had convinced her to come along as well.

'No,' his voice, trembling, threaded the still reception room. 'Not Susan.'

Brun caught his eye. Something in her look made him shiver. She held his gaze a moment too long, before turning away from him to smell the posies.

'Anyway, enough of my old chat. Why don't you hang on there a mo' while I get an MP47-A and we'll have it all again – properly this time, not all out of breath like.'

'It's very simple, Ron.' Brun's voice, laden with impatience as she turned at last from the flowers.

'Our parents left the house yesterday morning to visit the Rental Agency for the property where we are staying, and they haven't been back since. So unless you plan to offer us the hospitality of your cells for the balance of our holiday, I suggest you tick the appropriate boxes on your MP47-A and then make a call to the rental Agency to see if anyone there knows where our parents are. Their names are Jordan, by the way. Roger Dean and Hjelle Miyake Jordan. Hjelle Miyake's Cantonese by birth. Here's a description of them I wrote this morning. Our address and the Rental Agency details are there as well.'

Brun laid a folded slip of paper on the reception desk.

Ron put down his pen.

'Looks like you've done my work for me.'

Chad, sighing, said, 'We're sorry to be rude. But we're both very

worried. They might have had an accident, or anything.'

Ron, reclaiming his pen, wrote thoughtfully on the form. Thick fingers rested lightly on Brun's sheet of paper, as if afraid it might suddenly vanish. He finished writing, put down his pen, slid the paper towards him and stapled it to the form.

'Would you like a receipt for this?'

'I'd rather have my parents back, thank you very much.'

Ron nodded sagely. He seemed totally unaffected by either Brun's impatient rudeness or Chad's abortive attempts to be friendly.

'I'll need to make a call. You can wait here. There's a crossword magazine somewhere. I'll try not to be too long.'

As good as his word, Ron was back in under ten minutes.

'Now I've spoken to a Mrs Britten at the Agency and she's agreed to send an Agent to check over the property. If there's something wrong, as you claim, there'll be a full refund and they'll arrange a new property to rent. The Agent should be there some time this afternoon.'

'What about our parents?'

'Mrs Britten didn't know. The staff member in the office yesterday is on sick leave today. They're trying to reach her. If I was you I'd go home. Perhaps your folks had to spend the night in a B&B. I'm sure they'll turn up. Do you have a relative you can call?'

'Didn't you hear what I said?' Brun, impatiently. 'It's all on there.' She glanced pointedly at the MP47-A, to which her slip of paper had been stapled.

Ron smiled distantly. 'Sorry if I seem a bit distracted. Touch off colour today.'

Chad, looking up sharply, said, 'Tinnitis?'

'Spot on.' Ron nodded. 'Ringing in me ears. Had it all week now. Like old church bells. Coming down with a summer cold, I reckon. Never mind. Your Mum and Dad'll be back today, I'm sure. If not we'll see what we can do in the morning.'

Brun snorted.

‘OK, well, hope you feel better soon. Come on Brun.’

Chad, dragging his sister by the arm, almost ran from the station.

As the station door closed behind them Chad noticed for the first time that there were posies on the outside window sills too. White flowers, like snow, drank morning sunlight. The smell of summer was overpowering. People drifted by, anonymous, dressed in happy smiles, with shopping bags or prams. Children squealed distantly. A small boy in shorts and a T shirt sat cross-legged on the ground further along the high street, melting holes in the tarmac with a magnifying glass. The air tasted of brine and hot macadam.

‘I didn’t notice flowers when we went in.’

‘You can let go of my arm now.’

‘Sorry. What about the flowers?’

‘What about them? I expect someone put them there when we were inside.’

‘Did you hear what he said? Eighteen. Eighteen gone and all called Susan.’

‘So?’ Her voice, abrasive, defensive.

‘What do you know about it?’

‘What do you think I should know? I’m not clairvoyant!’

Chad, head shaking slowly, said, ‘No. No, I’m not having that. You know something, I know you do. Something about Ellyn.’

Brun, eyes narrowed, studied him minutely.

He struggled to avoid shrinking from her gaze.

‘You shouldn’t have lied to me.’ Her voice, a dark cloud, promise of thunder. ‘You know I hate that. Ever since Mum.’

‘It wasn’t my fault she lied about – you know. Anyway. Stop changing the subject. I told you the day before yesterday Ellyn’s name was Susan

and now eighteen people with the same name have vanished. I wonder, if we checked officer Ron's MP47, as to whether their ages would all be the same too. What do you think, Brun? Shall I go back in there and ask?'

Brun dropped her eyes.

'You shouldn't have lied to me. That's all.'

'And – what – the Susans would all be safe now while eighteen people called Ellyn would be missing?'

Chad felt anger rise inside him. A humming sound filled his ears, driving deep into his brain. The smell of apple blossom clung to every posy on the Police Station wall.

'What did you find out about Ellyn? Tell me!'

A moment hung between them.

'God there's no pleasing some people!'

Brun turned on her heel.

'Where are you going?'

'Come with me and find out.'

'Where, Brun?'

'If I tell you you'll just think I'm making it up.'

'Brun!'

Her eyes, shining, hard as ice.

'Why can't you trust me?'

Chad, biting his lip, hesitated.

'Why can't you just trust me, Chad?'

A long moment of silence stretched out between them.Brun pursed her lips in scorn.

'We're going to the Library. They have local records there. I'm going to show you something you don't know about the lovely Ellyn. Then you'll

know everything I've done has been to protect you.'

'Everything-'

Chad felt his stomach lurch. But Brun was gone, turning to leap the startled boy holding the magnifying glass, suddenly lost in the mid-morning shoppers. Running full tilt along the high street, it was as much as Chad could do to keep up.

Tucked away at the end of a narrow, twisting street, in places still cobbled, the town library was an old building, white-rendered and black-beamed.

The reading room was small and books peeled from its crooked walls with the smell of ancient knowledge and fresh paper. Chad, rubbing his arms, shivered. The library was not cold – in fact it was uncomfortably warm. A damp hospital-warmth that seemed to ooze from the books themselves.

He thought, as if all the books that no-one reads anymore come here to die.

An assistant glanced up from a stack of returns. Heart shaped face framed by short dark hair. Violet eyes. A smile that didn't quite reach them.

'Help you dear?'

'I'm looking for a girl.'

'We only do books.'

Chad, breathless from his run, attempted a laugh.

'I meant my sister. She came in. Just now. I lost her.'

'Losing a sister.' Musing. 'That's not entirely responsible behaviour for someone your age.'

'She runs faster than me.'

The assistant, studying Chad carefully, tilted her head slightly to one side.

'Olympic gold, I would imagine. To beat you.'

Chad shrugged, unsure how to respond, unsure also whether to come further into the room. Fresh air from the doorway at his back was a reassuring sensation he was suddenly reluctant to abandon.

'Anyway. She came here. Something about town records. Did you see her?'

The assistant pointed with a bony finger.

'Non fiction to the left.'

Chad frowned. He was suddenly aware of two arched doorways set into the shelves that filled the reading room's available wall space from floor to ceiling. The doorways were directly opposite each other, one in the left wall, one in the right. The assistant was indicating the one on the left.

Chad, guided by the bony finger, nodded hesitant thanks. The assistant nodded once, precisely, then resumed working.

Chad paused at the arched doorway. The wood was gnarled, ancient black, and smelled somehow of brine.

Beyond the doorway the room was lined with books. Shafts of sunlight, bronzed by parchment, penetrated the ceiling through iron-grated skylights.

The room seemed even warmer than the one he'd come from. The shadows blacker, the light patches more burned out.

He thought, like a photocopy left too long in the machine.

Chad's fingers drifted along the arched door frame. Old wood twisted against his skin. The image of muscle and sinew rose unbidden in his mind. For a moment he heard voices, like people shouting at the end of a long tunnel. The floor seemed to sway, like a bus double-timing it through country lanes. A double-decker striking fogged pollen sparks from orchard limbs, full of people you didn't see get on speaking in a language you'd never heard before.

That or-

'The timbers have a history.' The voice, strangely familiar, emerged slowly from the spine-laden gloom. 'Old towns like this they used to make buildings out of whatever they could find. Ancient ships too old to work the sea anymore found a new home here.'

Another library assistant, pushing a wooden trolley laden with returns. Heart shaped face framed by short dark hair. Violet eyes. A smile that didn't quite reach them. Chad had to blink. The eyes were a shade darker, the skin a shade paler. As if the assistant, like the room, was a copy of what had come before.

'A new home with old ghosts.'

Chad glanced back over his shoulder. A trolley was just disappearing past the doorway, pushed by an assistant with short, dark hair. He looked back into the room. The same heart shaped face held him in its grip. He twisted wildly, book-ended by violet eyes and smiles that didn't quite reach.

'They say this place was made from the bones of Viking ships abandoned here in the twelfth century. But I don't know any wood that can last that long, do you? Eight centuries. Maybe more. That's a long time.'

Chad blinked. An image of the Symphonion sprang into his mind. Not the gleaming perfection as rendered by his sister. The way he'd first seen it. Old, twisted, tumbling upwards from the junkscape, the wood stained and blackened. Stained and blackened. Like the wood in the library door frame.

He thought, the Symphonion is only a hundred years old. But how old is the wood it's made from? And what was it part of before it was made into a music box?

Chad blinked. Framed by a checkerboard of faded bronze sunlight, the assistant seemed to be waiting for a response to her words.

Chad said, firmly, 'I'm looking for a girl.'

'We only-'

'-do books. So I hear. I mean my sister. She mentioned the old town records.'

'The reference library is that way.'

Again, Chad became aware of doors, framed by shelves in opposite walls, like reflections in a mirror partly obscured by beams of dusty sunlight. The assistant was pointing a bony finger at the archway on the left.

‘Thanks.’

‘Welcome.’

Trolley wheels squeaked into the distance. To Chad they were the creak of ship’s rigging.

The chamber beyond the left hand doorway was smaller still, and seemed even warmer and darker, if that was possible. The smell of brine seemed stronger here too. A single grated skylight dripped burned out sunlight in stretched rectangular puddles across the wooden shelves and floor.

Books, stacked ten feet high between knotted shelves, exhaled ancient times and distant places, enticing.

He thought, I could get lost here. Lost in the world of these books. I might never find my way out. Maybe they don’t want me to find my way out.

‘I often think we should supply new visitors with a ball of string.’ The voice, over-familiar now. As were the heart shaped face, the bob, the violet eyes, the smile that didn’t quite reach.

Chad, shaken from his reverie, observed smugly, ‘Twins.’

‘Triplets. I assume you’re familiar with the legend of the Minotaur.’

‘Legends are Brun’s thing. Brun’s my sister. I don’t suppose you’ve-’

A bony finger, pointing.

‘Town records, through the door on the left.’

Chad frowned. ‘That’s four lefts. I should be back where I started. Or at least in the middle of the street. Don’t you people believe in right angles here?’

The assistant, studying Chad, tilted her head slightly.

‘A library is a limited space containing limitless knowledge.’

‘Every book I’ve ever read is bigger on the inside than the out.’

‘Perceptive child.’

‘Thanks for the compliment.’

A thin smile.

‘We only do books.’

Trolley wheels, squeaking, receded into the distance.

‘It’s about time. I’ve been waiting ages.’

Brun’s voice, impatient, ebbed and flowed among the knotted shelves.

‘Making eyes at the alphabet sisters were we?’

A musical laugh, like distant bells or melting ice.

‘Come on then, you wanted to see this.’

Chad, approaching warily, saw Brun slide open an archive drawer. Inside the drawer, a forest of newspapers hung from thin steel pins. Brun selected an issue and carefully removed it. She placed it gently on a leather-blottered reading table. She touched a switch. A brass-scalloped reading light flickered on, competing palely with the grid of sunlight crawling slowly across the table-top.

‘They have electricity here then?’ Chad, grinning.

‘Sshh. A library is no place to crack jokes. Look here.’

Paper, crackling, smoothed beneath Brun’s hands.

‘This is what I wanted you to see.’

Chad moved closer.

‘ “Local worker finds historic treasure trove.” ’

‘There’s more.’

Brun, urgently, pushed the paper towards him.

‘While overseeing restoration of local council buildings, Ian Reynolds, architect responsible for the recent restoration of the City’s Mayberry Theatre, was amazed when one of his workers struck ice. Had he stumbled across a medieval cold-room, or an old well where the water had frozen? Perhaps the site was of historic significance. Further excavations revealed

the ice deposit was made up of eighteen irregular blocks weighing as much as twenty tons each. The blocks were arranged in a precise configuration: although buried in the earth, the blocks were arranged exactly like a stone circle. Inside one of the blocks was a body. A perfectly preserved Viking warrior which experts claim may date back to the twelfth century. The "icehenge" melted within hours – except for the block containing the body, which was preserved and shipped away for study. Plans have been mooted to return the body to the town museum for display.'

Chad frowned. 'What's this got to do with-'

'Wait – here-' Brun replaced the paper impatiently. A new headline read:

' "Historic Find Dogged By Tragedy." '

Chad scanned the print. As the words unfolded before him a humming sound seemed to rise in his ears, spiking deep into his brain. The scent of apple blossom threaded the dusty reek of old books, and a musical resonance echoed distantly, like melting ice or a ship's bell, and the ship too far from shore ever to return.

'That's right!' Brun's voice, urgent now. 'On the day the Viking warrior was removed from the ground eighteen people in the town collapsed with strokes. Look,' the paper, crackling. 'They have pictures. Five died.'

'But-'

'Listen Chad. Ellyn's father found the warrior. His was the pick that broke the rime of ice. Eighteen people related to his work force collapsed, including his daughter. Only Ellyn recovered. And then she burned down his shop.'

Chad, rubbing his eyes, tried to take it all in.

'She's dangerous, Chad. Maybe mad, I don't know. I just wanted you to know – since you seem so utterly besotted with her.'

Chad, lost in thought, said nothing.

'Chad? Have you even heard a word I've said?'

But Chad was gone, mind bent on a singular resonance.

He looked up suddenly.

‘Your necklace. Give it to me.’

‘What? I-’

‘Right now, Brun! I’m not arguing.’

He grabbed the necklace, spun it around her neck.

‘Ow, that burns!’

‘Here. See? Take it off!’

‘Steady on, you’ll break it!’

‘Take it off then!’

‘Alright!’

He snatched the necklace, laid it on the table in the light.

‘I thought so! Here – you see? And here! And here!’

I don’t understand.’ Her voice, puzzled, even scared.

‘Look Brun! Use that mind you’re so proud of! Eighteen blocks of ice. Eighteen stroke victims. Eighteen missing girls called Susan.’ His eyes, glaring. ‘And eighteen amber tears in your necklace.’

‘You’re mad. That’s just coincidence-’

‘No coincidence, Brun. Look at the paper. Eighteen stroke victims. Five dead. And here, on your necklace, five flawed pieces of amber. Five dead; five damaged tears. Explain that away if you can!’

Chapter 10

‘What a lovely necklace.’

The voice, pleasantly neutral, greeted Chad and Brun from the shadows gathering within the farmhouse.

‘Oh!’ Chad, fingers glued by surprise to the slowly opening front door, jumped.

‘Amber is so cheerful. Like little pieces of sunlight.’

Chad hesitated.

Pushing past her brother, Brun uttered a short laugh as she opened the door and entered the house. ‘It’s the Agent. Come on, might as well introduce ourselves.’

‘The Agent. Of course. Bound to be.’ Chad, face burning, followed in his sister’s footsteps. ‘I mean, who else in this town would consider breaking and entering in broad daylight?’

Brun, with some irritation, hissed, ‘It’s not breaking and entering. He’s the Agent. I expect he has a key. And Dad called him, remember?’

‘Said he was going to call him.’

‘For goodness’ sake Chad. You’re so paranoid.’

Counterpoint to the sunlight, the front hall was once again wreathed in chilly gloom. Chad thought, as if we lost all the light and warmth when we lost Dad and HM.

He reached for the light switch, then remembered the shattered, frost rimed bulb. His hand fell, slowly.

‘Where are you then?’

‘Why right here, of course.’

A figure grew out of the gloom. Chad blinked. Smart suit, neutral tones, perfectly fitted to an average body. Not too tall, not too short. Not too wide, not too thin, the Letting Agent’s face perfectly matched his voice. No feature stood out more than any other. Everything about him seemed in perfect balance. Chad, trying to fix the Agent’s face in his mind for later analysis, couldn’t quite seem to grasp the shape. Suit, face, hands, poise... all were strictly neutral. A man made out of grey.

Chad thought, as if his job is to be forgotten.

The grey man spoke. For a second Chad heard shattered, frost-rimed glass, crunching underfoot.

‘I understand you’re having some problems with your pipes. May I look around?’

‘Looks like you’ve already been doing that. Bring a key did you? In case no-one was home?’

‘Chad!’ Brun, her voice sharp. ‘Please feel free. The pipes are all frozen up.’

‘We haven’t had a decent cuppa in days. Don’t suppose you brought a flask?’

Brun, elbowing her brother scornfully aside, added, ‘I’m Brun Jordan, by the way. This wretched specimen is Chad, my brother.’

‘An Englishman’s home is his castle.’ The grey man fixed Chad with a humourless stare. ‘I’m sorry to intrude upon your castle, Chad.’ A hand extended, sleeved in grey. Smooth fingers grey as his cuffs, slightly curled, as if to shake. ‘Maybe we should lower the drawbridge?’

Chad took a step back. At least, he thought about taking a step back. But what happened instead was very different. Without really knowing how, Chad found he was holding out his hand to clasp that of the grey man.

The skin was neither cold nor warm, dry nor moist. The grip was light and even. A humming sound filled his head, that and the smell of apple blossom. For a moment Chad wasn’t even aware that their hands were

touching. He thought, like getting into a bath where the water's exactly the same temperature as your skin. You could just slip under and drown, and you wouldn't even know it.

Chad finally managed a step backwards. Instantly a shock ran through his arm, as if breaking contact had tripped some kind of switch. His ears rang painfully. His hand prickled as if gripped by static electricity, or thorns, a hand from a hole in the world that would never let go.

'Pleased to meet you Chad, Brun. My card.'

Brun, taking the proffered card, grinned. 'Pleased to meet you too Mister…' Glancing at the card. 'Oh. There's no name.'

'Agency policy. You can call me Gary.'

'Pleased to meet you Mister Gary.'

'Just Gary. Now then. Where shall we start the tour?'

Brun moved closer to the grey man. 'The water froze first in the kitchen. Didn't it Chad?'

'What? Oh. Kitchen, yes.' Chad, taking a steadying breath, added, 'Did anyone at your Agency meet our parents yesterday?'

'Wouldn't know. Peripatetic. Don't get into the office much, I'm afraid.'

'Really?'

'Really.'

A moment.

'It's just that they didn't come home. And they haven't phoned or left a note or anything.'

'How distressing. Did you speak to the police?'

'This morning.'

'I see.'

Chad waited.

'Well, I'm sure they'll turn up. To check my work if nothing else.

Speaking of which, I believe the water main is in the basement?'

'That's right.'

'Then that's where we'll begin.'

The grey man, with Brun in tow, receded into the gloom of the farm house.

Chad, following reluctantly, thought he saw both faces glance briefly sideways at the lounge door as they passed, as if in response to a sound only they could hear. Mind fixed on the memory of a heartbreaking melody, like distant bells or melting ice, Chad also paused to listen intently at the door, but heard only the voice of an old house, breathing patient days into the cold sunlight.

Just for now the Symphonion's voice was stilled.

Another sound took its place.

Scraping. Tapping.

Chad, inching reluctantly down the hall after the receding figures, stopped. A shape fluttered across the leaded panes in the window beside the ancient front door. A shadow moved in the hallway.

The shadow of a hand.

Chad, breathing hard, rubbed his arm, where the leather-gloved hand in the church had gripped. His chest heaved. A distant humming sound, like old machinery far away in time, made his ears itch.

Fingers rattled, long and thin, against the knobbly glass.

'Think you can just follow people around, do you? Just follow them around and grab them whenever it suits you?'

And then, without thought, and anger moving in him like a cloud, Chad strode towards the door, yanking it open with a wordless shout of fear and rage.

'Chad, for heaven's sake stop shouting. He'll know I'm here.'

Ellyn!

Ellyn, and her duffle coat and silly scarf.

Ellyn. And her eyes shining like fire in winter.

Chad, blinking, felt he'd run head first into a wall. Her name tumbled from his lips, broken pieces of a word, falling between them.

Seeing her was a velvet shock, like coming from a freezing cave into a hot summer day, and the damp beading his lashes making butterflies of light when he blinked that shivered sunlight from rainbow wings.

Ellyn, tilting her head, tipped sunlight from her glasses.

'He's here, isn't he Chad?'

'Who-'

'The grey man.'

'How-'

'I've been watching him.'

'Watching us you mean-'

'Hush, Chad, or there'll be no kiss for you. No secret kiss upon the field of battle 'twixt boy and man.'

'Brun's right. You're off your rocker!'

Her eyes, striking sparks. 'I've something for you, Chad. Something to show you. Come outside, into the light. It'll be safer there.'

A fist clenched inside him.

'What then? What nonsense this time? More metal detectors? Chunks of some UFO washed up like old driftwood on the beach? Or, I know! Maybe some old bean tins? Heinz 57.'

Ellyn, smiling dangerously, merely beckoned.

Iron to a magnet, he came to her, and stood in the slowly tilting sun, and felt a warmth flow through him, tingling, like good pins and needles, and his breath, like melting ice, steamed in the daylight, and he thought, as if I breathed it in, whatever was inside the house, and it was inside me, but now I'm breathing it out again. Breathing it out into the light, to die.

His heart thumped slowly. The fist in his chest unclenched. Whatever grey shadow might have emerged with his breath curled and died without struggle in the sunlight.

‘What- what did you just do?’

‘Sit with me, Chad, here on this stile.’

‘I don’t want to sit! Just tell me what-’

‘You tell me, Chad. What did you do?’

Chad, awash with the memory of grey. A man made entirely of grey. ‘He was... I can’t quite put it into words. It was as if... oh, you know, when you turn the contrast down on a TV. Everything goes flat. Voice, face, body language, clothes. Everything about him was perfectly balanced. Perfectly balanced, but never in harmony, if you know what I mean.’

Her eyes, inviting him to continue.

‘A pure tone. Like your metal detector. No harmonics d’you see? Like the sound it makes when it has something – some hidden scrap of metal – trapped in its sights.’

Her lips, parted, cupped a smile.

‘I heard a humming sound like old machinery when he spoke. I’ve been hearing it a lot lately.’ Chad, listening, could hear the humming even now. Faint with distance, still it drove deep into his head, with the smell of apple blossom, like broken machinery grinding restlessly on a distant horizon.

‘Go on.’

‘I wanted to step away. From him. To... run, actually. Something stopped me. As if the signals got mixed up somehow, between my mind and my legs.’ Chad, scowling, added, ‘How could he do that? Throw a circuit breaker in my head like that? As if I was just... I don’t know, some kind of... machine. Just... I don’t know, like a clock or something, when you switch the alarm off... no more thought than that...’

‘You’re only human, after all.’

Her voice, neither smile nor frown, hung between them on the still summer air.

‘And what precisely is that supposed to-’

‘You behave as if he had a choice.’

‘Everyone has a choice!’

‘Does the pupa choose whether to become a dragonfly?’

‘A dragonfly is a thing. Just a thing. He’s a-’

‘-man?’

‘I was going to say Letting Agent.’ Chad, sighing. ‘You know what? This is crazy. I can’t believe I’m even having this conversation, not with Dad and HM still...’

A moment hung between them.

‘I mean…’

Patient sunlight tilted past the zenith and morning became afternoon.

Chad, sighing. ‘Are you trying to tell me he’s not-’

‘Here!’ Ellyn, reaching into her pocket, interrupted with a folded scrap of paper.

‘Look hard, and think on it while you do.’

He scowled. ‘That’s the newspaper article Brun showed me in the library this morning! Have you been-’

‘Following? You know I have. I have always been here, in your dreams and lies, waiting with a kiss. Now you must be here too. Right here and now. In this moment, in this world. Any other is not safe for you. Now look!’

Ellyn, shaking the paper flat, trapped sunlight in its dusty folds. Parchment yellow glare stung his eyes.

Through a veil of tears he saw.

The article. Eighteen victims of stroke. Five dead. And photographs. And names.

Edward Gary.

Letting Agent.

The grey man in the house with his sister wore a dead man's face.

Sunlight burned, hot yellow spokes in Chad's head. The humming sound was louder now, more piercing, and with it came the smell of apple blossom. He thought, it's like the world is too small for me all of a sudden. As if I got out to have a stretch and now I can't get back in no matter how hard I try.

He pressed his back against the wooden stiles as if to wrench himself out of one moment and into the next by sheer brute force.

'I can't... this is all too...'

'Look at me. Chad, look at me!' Her voice, fiercely percussive, slapped his ears.

The world snapped back into focus.

'No way! Look at you? What are you thinking, Ellyn? What's going on in that head of yours? Following us around, talking like a crazy person? I liked you, Ellyn. I thought you were OK. Now look at you. Stealing stuff from the library. Dead people don't come to life, Ellyn. All the laws of the universe say so and I believe them. I came here for a holiday. Just a holiday.'

Her eyes, softening, cradled him.

'Now Dad and HM are gone and the clouds aren't moving and old churches hide holes in the world and... I just wanted a holiday.'

Ellyn, waiting for the clock spring to wind down, said nothing.

Chad, exhausted. 'Not... some kind of lunatics convention.'

A moment hung between them.

'You're not mad Chad. You're not going mad, though I expect it feels like it.'

Paper, flapping like an enraged gull.

'All this is real.'

‘Ha!’

Chad, uttering a contemptuous laugh, pushed himself off the stile.

‘Brun was right.’

‘Well that’s a turn up for the book, I must say.’

Brun, her voice rolling like warm rain across summer hills.

‘I mean, just what precisely is it that we agree on, Chad?’

Chad, turning from one girl to another, wanted to shout, even scream at the insane place the world seemed to have become.

Chad, whispering. ‘You’re right. She’s mad.’

Looking right at Ellyn. ‘Dangerous.’

Brun smiling, said nothing.

‘Where is he?’

‘The Letting Agent?’

‘The grey man.’

‘He’ll be here soon. He’s making a last check.’

‘Check? Of what?’

Brun, shrugging. ‘How should I know?’

‘You were thick enough.’

‘Thick as thieves.’ Ellyn, her voice a scratchy whisper.

‘Well, Chad, if you wanted to know that badly, you wouldn’t be out here hobnobbing with girls, would you?’

Chad, squeezing the top of the stile with both fists, felt a sharp pain. A splinter drove deeply into the heel of his hand. He glanced down. A perfect droplet of blood squeezed out between his palm and the gate. Losing surface tension, the drop soaked into the wood, staining it darkly. Not red but brown, the colour of autumn. Autumn blood on a summer gate.

In my wealth shall no man delight.

Chad, breathing hard, looked up, right into his sister's eyes.

'Something's going on here. Where is he, Brun? Why did you leave him in there? He could be up to anything.'

'Silly boy.' Brun, smiling, leaned across the stile to kiss her brother on the cheek. Her breath was sweet, like apple blossom. She spoke again but all he heard was a melody, heartbreakingly pure, like distant bells or melting ice.

'It's the Symphonion. It is, isn't it? You've left him in there with the Symphonion!'

Brun said nothing.

Chad, watching her smile fade, gripped the stile harder, driving the splinter more painfully home into his flesh. For a moment he saw thorns, a grasping hand in a ruined church that wouldn't let go. Then the image was gone. He was the one who wouldn't let go now.

'I must admit I like a child with education and spirit.'The grey man, walking from the lee of the house, and the shadows from within gathering around him, flowing into him and filling him up.

'What's a Symphonion, Chad? Some kind of music box I imagine, a corruption, perhaps, of symphony and automaton.'

Chad, scowling, said thinly, 'Just lately this holiday's been like living in a dream for me. I feel like there are things out there in the world I don't really understand. Impossible things, things I can only see out of the corner of my eye. To be honest it's been scaring me. And I didn't know what to do about it, or even if it was real at all.'

Chad grabbed the flapping paper from Ellyn and waved it, a bloodstained parchment mirror, in the grey man's face.

'Here's something I know for a fact.'

'Chad!'

'Shut up Brun!'

The grey man said nothing. He merely stood, a thing of motionless poise before the madly flapping newspaper.

A breeze came out of nowhere and Chad could feel it tugging at him but the grey man was unmoved, hair and clothes perfectly still. Chad thought, like when you blink your eyes open, just for a second, and whatever's in front of you seems to be frozen in time.

'You're like a photograph in a montage. The one that sticks out because the black density doesn't match.'

Chad, blinking, willed the grey man to move.

'And while we're on the subject of photographs, perhaps you'd care to take a look at this!'

The paper, flapping madly now, crackling like static electricity, flinging droplets of blood from Chad's hand into the air. One clung to the lapel of the grey man's suit. To Chad it seemed as if all the colour drained from it instantly. The humming sound he could hear grew suddenly loud and near, like machinery working ferociously on the other side of a wall the world had made to keep it out.

The grey man moved infinitesimally. His gaze lowered to take in the photograph. Chad could see the face in the picture reflected in the grey man's eye. The madly flapping reflection seemed to strobe and then freeze, as if even the light reflected from the grey man was stilled in some way.

Chad, gathering his courage, climbed the stile and took a step towards the grey man. The world took on an intimately detailed appearance. Behind him Ellyn seemed to radiate a fierce heat, though she said nothing. Before him and slightly to one side Brun agitated, and he could see frustration, anger and embarrassment coming off her in waves, like heat ripples blurring a hot pavement. All around the world moved, subtly quivering with life; leaves and grass shivered in the wind, pollen swirled in drifting shafts of sunlight. A pair of dragonflies zigzagged crazily through the trees, their humming voices the sound of distant machinery.

Only the grey man was still.

Perfectly still, like a preying mantis on the hunt.

'This is you, d'you see? Your face! A picture of a dead man!' Chad, snarling. 'It's a black and white photograph. Shades of grey. But nicely focused. A balanced shot. Oh yes. Perfectly composed. Just like you.'

The grey man, motionless, let silence be his voice.

‘What if I was to tear it up, eh? What if I put a flaw in this perfect image? What would happen to you then, d’you suppose?’

Chad ran a finger nail through the picture

The grey man did not move.

Chad pushed deeper, rocking his nail back and forth, enlarging the groove in the paper. Daylight showed through the printed face’s cheek, a curved sliver of pure white in the parchment yellowed newsprint.

And now something happened.

A single tear appeared on the grey man’s cheek. To Chad the curled track seemed like a slot in the grey man through which daylight shone with all the colours of the world.

Chad, eyes wide, felt a fist clench in his chest. The humming in his head grew louder, more insistent. His nostrils clogged with the scent of apple blossom and his ears rang with a heartbreaking melody, like distant bells or melting ice.

‘Chad! You’re being rude! Stop it!’

Brun, her voice breaking into syllables, tiny pieces of contiguous time with clear gaps between them, as if everything he could see and hear was caught motionless in a strobe light. Only the scent of apple blossom stayed smooth, threading the gaps between each discrete moment.

‘Chad – you’re – be – ing – rude –’

‘You’ve – no – i - dea -’

‘What – you’re – tal – king – a – bout -’

Chad, feeling immense resistance, grasped the paper with both hands. He moved them in opposite directions. It was like trying to tear a plank of wood. Chad felt his muscles bunch and sting. Blood stained his hands.

Then, with a screech like old hinges, the paper tore.

The grey man moved!

He jerked!

His arms pumped. His mouth opened and closed. His legs began to shake.

The wind caught his suit, flapping it madly like a kite, and him the sticks.

A stuttering sound came from his mouth, like hiccups gone mad, or some distant machine all set to crash.

The world speeded up.

In a second all the sights and sounds and smells slammed together in Chad's head, wham! like a hammer and him the anvil, and his head rang with the shock of it like a bell.

'Where are my parents! Where are Roger and Hjelle Miyake! What have you done with them!'

Chad, shaking with rage.

'Where are my mum and dad!'

'Where are they you grey freak!

'Tell me right now or so help me I'll-'

'Now then what's all the hullaballoo?'

A man's voice, familiar.

Ron, the policeman from this morning.

He stood, leaning a bicycle against the dry stone wall, then turned and strolled towards the stile.

'Chad, Brun. Thought I'd drop by and see if your parents had turned up yet.'

'Ron!' Brun, her voice flushed with relief. 'How – how perfectly... I mean, thank you. No. They're still not back. But Mister Gary from the Agency has come to see about the pipes.'

To Chad, her words were distant things, unfocused, like fog. He was staring at the grey man, who was slouching, poise gone, rubbing his eyes

with knuckled fists.

‘It’s just...’

The grey man, his voice crowded with tired shadows.

‘... just... Gary.’

‘It’s him!’

Chad, his rage a summer storm.

‘He’s got something to do with it, I know he has. He’s done something to our parents!’

‘Oh?’ Ron the policeman climbed over the stile and approached Chad. ‘Why would you say that?’

Chad waved the newspaper. ‘He’s here. His face is here. He’s a dead man walking!’

Ron took the newspaper and smoothed it out, holding the torn edges together. He glanced down. Then he glanced at the grey man and his face took on a concerned look.

‘Gary? Are you alright?’

‘I... I... that boy... ‘

‘I understand. I do. But he’s not to know. These children have lost their parents. They weren’t to know you’ve lost someone too.’

Ron handed the paper back to Chad. ‘The man in the picture is Gary’s brother. Not quite a twin. Close enough to fool a stranger, like yourself.’

Ron turned to Ellyn, standing quietly nearby.

‘Thought you’d have known better.’

Ellyn said nothing.

Ron turned back to Chad.

‘Reckon you’d better apologise to Gary so he can get on with the business of fixing your water.’

Chad, burning hollow, muttered under his breath.

‘It’s alright. They’re just... they’re just children. The boy anyway. The girl – Brun – she’s alright.’

The grey man straightened incrementally.

‘I need to make a more detailed examination of the house. I’ll take a room in the town. I’ll be back tomorrow morning, if that’s agreeable.’

Brun nodded. ‘That’ll be fine thanks. I’m sorry about-’

‘It really doesn’t matter. Water under the bridge. It all happened a long time ago. Tomorrow then.’

The grey man opened the gate, moved through into the lane and closed it carefully behind him. Chad watched him walk away towards town.

‘Didn’t he bring a car?’

Ron, nodding to his bicycle, said, ‘People round here don’t seem to be having much luck with cars lately. Burst radiators mostly. Just like in winter.’ He returned to his bicycle. ‘Well, since you’re all OK, reckon I’ll head back myself.’

Chad watched Ron cycle out of sight and then sat down on the grass by a patch of bluebells.

Brun glared at him. ‘Now look what you’ve done. You and-’ a glance at Ellyn made the name unnecessary.

Chad looked up.

‘I’m not in the mood to argue, Brun.’

‘Is that so?’ Brun, her voice snapping angrily, folded her arms. ‘You’re always looking for something to criticise lately, it seems to me.’

Ellyn, softly, ‘Tell her Chad.’

Tell her what?’ Brun, indignant. ‘I’m standing right here!’

‘The grey man.’

Chad, coldly. ‘He knew about your necklace, Brun.’

‘He said it was nice, you mean. So what?’

Chad, weary, climbed to his feet.

‘He knew about it before we entered the house. Before he saw us. He even described it. “Like little pieces of sunlight.” ’

Chad, scowling, glared at his sister.

‘How did he do that Brun? How did he know you were wearing an amber necklace before he even saw us?’

Chapter 11

‘It doesn’t look that scary.’

Vincent, thoughtful, paced a slow semicircle around the Symphonion, squatting on the half-round table beside the piano in the lounge.

‘Are you sure this isn’t some book-thing? Scare the natives witless and see what they do, then put it in one of Brun’s stories?’

Chad, impatiently, thought, he’s such a kid.

After the grey man had left Brun had phoned Vincent and asked him to come over. Vincent had arrived with chips and Coke for four. But even post-chips, with all Ron the policeman’s relentless logic, and the grey man gone for nearly two hours, still Chad was absolutely certain something threatening - even dangerous - had passed by close enough to touch them. Like a hand in a ruined church reaching out to grab you from a hole in the world.

He thought, skin of our teeth. That’s what we dodged it by. Whatever it was.

But what if Ellyn hadn’t brought the paper with the grey man’s picture in it? What if Ron hadn’t turned up with a half-decent excuse for the grey man to leave? What would have happened then? What would the grey man have done to them then?

Chad, unwilling to entertain another shouting match, kept this thought to himself.

In the end though, he had to let it out.

He stood now, with Vincent, in the lounge.

‘Don’t you have any sense of the unusual about it?’

‘Nope, none at all. It’s just an old wooden box. Elegant for sure, enigmatic without a doubt - but honestly? I don’t understand how it could do the things you say. Play music without disks, freeze the pipes, all that.’

‘And burst radiators.’

‘And that.’ Vincent, extending a finger towards the Symphonion, pinged the lid.

Chad, mind stuck in a room full of cobalt light brighter than the stars, winced.

‘It’s in beautiful shape, I’ll give you that.’

‘Yes but that’s just it, it wasn’t. It was a wreck. Not even a week ago, it was a wreck. Just junk really. Now... well look at it! It looks like it was made yesterday.’

Vincent, shrugging, said nothing.

‘And there’s this.’

Chad, reaching out to the box, hesitated.

‘Will you open the lid, please?’

‘Scared?’

Chad, sighing, ‘Not now you’re here.’

‘Touché!’

Vincent, grinning, opened the lid.

Or rather tried to.

‘It’s stuck. Or locked.’

‘It can’t be locked.’ Chad, peering closer. ‘There’s no key. Anyway the lock’s too old, it would never-’

The lounge door opened with a dark thud.

‘What are you doing, Chad?’

Brun. Her voice cold, like ice.

‘What are you doing with my music box?’

Chad, surprised, recovered quickly. ‘Just showing it to Vincent. Thought he’d be interested.’

‘You didn’t tell me.’

‘Don’t you want people to see it? Vincent thinks its enigmatic and beautiful.’

Vincent, grinning. ‘Chad, if the music box belongs to Brun and she wants to keep it private, that’s fine with me. Brun, I’m sorry to intrude. Call it an accident of ignorance, OK?’

‘Ignorance is right.’

‘Chad!’ Her voice, softening. ‘It doesn’t matter. I probably over-reacted. I’ve put a lot of work into restoring it.’

‘You’ve done a great job. If your novel doesn’t sell you’ve probably got a future in restoration.’

Chad, softly. ‘You didn’t tell me you’d repaired the lock. How did you do that? And where did you find a key to fit?’

Brun, looking from Chad to Vincent, ‘There’s a picture in the lid, made of lacquer work. A girl wearing a necklace. Chad thinks the necklace looks like the one I found the other day at the Crown. When Chad got lost in the empty church and some of us had to go looking for him.’

Brun, her smile thorns.

Chad, rubbing a fingertip across phantom bruises, thought, except the church wasn’t empty. Not when I was inside. It was full of brambles. Thorns like hooks and a hand reaching out from a hole it made in the world to grab my arm and never let go.

He said, ‘You know what? Forget it. You can see the Symphonion another day, Vincent. I’m sure Brun will show it to you. Where’s Ellyn, Brun?’

‘I don’t know. She’s your friend. Where did you leave her?’

Chad, scornfully, stalked out of the lounge.

In the hallway, thumping grumpily to the kitchen, then turning to tiptoe back into the hall.

The lounge door was closed. From inside, voices.

‘Thanks for coming Vincent. I’m sorry Chad was so rude.’

‘Don’t give it a second thought. Have you guys mulled over where you’re kipping tonight?’

‘Not yet. Anyway. Do you want to see inside?’

‘Inside the music box? I thought the lid was stuck.’

‘It’ll open for me. There’s a trick.’

‘Impressed.’

A clink. A click. A moment of silence.

‘Oh!’ Vincent, his voice a near whisper.

‘She’s beautiful isn’t she?’

‘Very.’

‘Her name’s Freya.’

Chad, leaning closer, felt his hair move, as if in a breeze. Static, like fairground dodgems; charged particles, spiralling. The hallway seemed to darken. Or, no, not so much darken, as lose definition somehow.

A sound trickled through the door and into his head; a melody, heartbreakingly pure, like distant bells or melting ice.

Chad, touching the door, felt a minute vibration crawl along his arm, jarring. His eyes itched and he blinked. The hallway dimmed, losing shape, nothing more now than a formless grey fog peopled with fuzzy grey shadows that had once been furniture, the hall table, the coat rack, banisters, the front door...

Chad, dizzy, reached out to steady himself against the wall. He couldn’t seem to find it. As if the hallway had grown suddenly. His fingers seemed to sink into what felt like a thick, grey fabric. He thought, as if the world

was made of cloth and someone was pulling back the curtains.

The hallway seemed to lighten then, a faint bluish tinge, like starlight, or ice.

He heard voices, all tumbled together like a broken mosaic, like people shouting at the end of a long tunnel.

The scent of apple blossom clogged his nostrils.

Chad, losing balance, stumbled. He twisted, trying to stay upright. For a second he was inside the lounge. Inside and outside at the same time. As if the three spatial dimensions he had taken for granted his whole life were things to be folded up and tossed aside, crumpled paper. He tried to walk, found himself on his knees, crawled, felt himself moving in different directions at once. He closed his eyes but the blue light simply got brighter. He opened them and the light didn't fade. Now everything was like an X-ray. He could see the walls, the floor, the furniture; outside the house, the fence, the road, the town, the hills; all mapped over one another in glowing lines, merging, shifting, fractured harmonies of light blooming inside his head.

He shouted.

His voice, a spray of fog, meaningless noise.

And then from the apple-scented shadows came light. Sharp amber points, like pieces of cold sunlight, in a circle around him, and behind each a tall shadow, grey within grey, striding ever nearer, yet at the same time somehow never moving.

Chad, mind hooked by a gloved hand in a ruined church, thought, grey men! There's more than one of them! They're coming back!

He heard new sounds then, unclouded by the shadow-world he seemed to inhabit. Screams. The splash of metal in flesh. Running feet. More screams. The figures ran swiftly towards him, dark and shorn of detail, just shapes really, but filled with malice. He tried to scramble away but the figures surrounded him. Staring up, too terrified even to blink, Chad thought he saw a gleam of silver on each. Swords. Or knives, and each burning like sullen starlight in the grey fog.

Suddenly the noises made sense. The sounds of battle. These shapes

were warriors. Swords raised, they leaned towards him, smoke and fear, running with silver, awash now with smoky amber light.

Eighteen voices, burning in his head.

'In my wealth shall no man delight!'

Chad, waiting, clenched his eyes tight shut.

Then came a new sound, percussive, familiar, the solid drum of wood upon wood.

The slam of a lid.

The grey fog with its menacing figures was gone.

'Hello, Chad. Thought you might still be here.'

Brun, her voice cold, filled with scorn.

'Drop something, did we?'

Chad, blinking, grunted something in reply. Rough carpet dug into his elbows, cheek. He was lying on the floor in the hallway. The lounge door was open. Brun and Vincent staring down at him, cold accusation and warm humour.

Vincent, grinning, offered a hand.

Chad, levering himself onto one elbow, grabbed the hand, was yanked to his feet.

'You were right about the picture in the music box, Chad. It's beautiful.'

'And the necklace?'

'Guess you were right about that too. Spooky huh?'

Brun and Vincent exchanged tiny smiles.

'Brun wants me to read some of her story.'

'Make sure she doesn't give you the blank notebook.'

'See you later, Chad.'

Brun, her voice ice, led Vincent along the hallway and upstairs.

Chad, leaning against the now reassuringly solid wall, sucked in a few deep breaths. The air still smelled faintly of apple blossom. As the footsteps receded into the distance, Chad lurched to his feet and walked unsteadily into the kitchen. Plant-like, he followed the sun to the kitchen door. Here the sound of someone humming gradually eased its way into his head and, with the sun, burned off the last of the house's chill.

Following the voice, he found Ellyn perched on the fence separating the garden from the adjoining orchard. Apple blossom, cupping the late afternoon sunlight, made a white-gold halo around her face. Gentle wind moved between the trees; slow rain of blossom fell from the branches, summer snow.

Ellyn, gazing at Chad, drank fear and anger.

Chad, shaking. 'She did something – Brun – she did something to him. To Vincent. I heard music. That music again. Like bells. And everything went grey. Like when the grey man came out of the house, all shadows within shadows... and... I couldn't breathe. I mean, I breathed it in. The shadows, and... I don't... I can't... '

'You spoke to Vincent?' Her voice, soft, even.

'Yes!' Calmer, 'Don't ask me why. Things... things just seem like they're getting out of control somehow.'

'You told Vincent about the Symphonion?'

'I know, don't tell me. It was a dumb thing to do. I probably sounded like a complete idiot-'

'Did he believe you?'

Shrugging. 'You tell me.'

'Did you expect him to believe you?' Her voice, still soft but with an edge, sliced the still afternoon.

'Did you think it would be that easy?'

Chad, sighing, said, 'To tell you the truth I don't know what I thought. The grey man freaked me out. What with 'fessing up all my fears to Sir Galahad... I probably shouldn't have said anything.'

‘Forces are polarising.’

Ellyn, plucking apple blossom from the air.

‘And what’s that supposed to mean?’

She climbed nimbly off the fence. Pushing her glasses more firmly onto the bridge of her nose, she sat cross-legged on the grass. Picking up a small twig, she began to scrape lines in the dusting of apple blossom on the ground.

‘The world is a big magnet. Charged particles follow lines of force in huge arcs from pole to pole. The arcs travel thousands of miles out into space before returning to the earth. At the point farthest from the poles the particles are repelled from the more intense fields at the poles. The particles sometimes get caught there, bouncing back and forth, unable to complete their journey. Instead they spiral around the earth, round and round like a fairground carousel. And when negative electrons and positive ions move in opposite directions... ‘

‘You get a current!’ Chad, mind a prisoner of the apple blossom hieroglyphs, heard a distant hum like old machinery far away but getting nearer, endlessly working to make a hole in the world.

Something made him look up. The sky was deep blue, seared bronze by sunlight. Inland the hills elevated the horizon, bringing it closer but towards the coast, as the land flattened out, he could see the top edge of a ring of clouds balanced low and still on the seaward horizon.

A ring of cloud, unmoving, like a wall around the world.

‘Bright boy.’ Ellyn, watching Chad make connections, chewed casually on the twig.

‘So that’ll be a kiss on credit then.’

Chad, sighing impatiently. ‘You’re talking about aurora borealis. The northern lights.’

Ellyn rubbed her duffle coat, then held her hand out flat, palm down, near to the ground. She spread her fingers. Grass rippled. Blossom jumped suddenly up from the ground to cling to her fingers.

‘Forces are at their most potent when polarising.’

Gloved in pollen, Ellyn wiggled her fingers. The glove disintegrated as the static charge was dispersed.

Chad, frowning. ‘You know, I don’t think you’re talking about the northern lights at all. I think you’re talking about Brun and me. We’re polarising. Moving apart. Stretching a charge out between us. And everything here is trapped between us, like charged particles, spiralling round and round the earth like a fairground carousel. Round and round like a music box disk. The forces of the universe.’

Ellyn, smiling, said nothing.

‘Making a current.’

Chad, biting his lip.

‘Not electrical though. Some other kind of current.’

He thought, the kind that lets music boxes play impossible music, fills ruined churches with impossible brambles. The kind that makes holes in the world with hands in them; blood-gloved hands that grab and hold, and never let go.

Her gaze, holding winter.

‘You mystify me.’

Chad, shivering, his voice a tumbled jigsaw.

‘You scare me, you attract me. Why is that Ellyn?’

‘Everything has lines of force. You’re spiralling. Perhaps we both are.’

Chad, kicking the fence with his toe.

‘Why can’t I get a straight answer from you?’

‘We define the world with questions. Questions are like talismans. We collect them, rack them, hone them. Each has a proper time, a proper use.’

Ellyn, standing, rubbed the edge of her hearing aid with a thumb.

‘In time gone by the talisman of choice was root, flint, bone, claw. Now we have how, where, when, why. ’

‘And, who?’

‘Oh that never changed.’

‘What did change then? Did you change, Ellyn?’

His words, charged particles, spiralling.

‘Did you change after your dad found the Viking? After your stroke?’

Ellyn, sadly. ‘You use questions as befits your name.’

Chad, belly knotting impatiently. ‘OK, I’ve had it. That’s the last piece of semi-mystical nonsense I’m prepared to-’

She turned then, and all the sadness the world ever owned wrapped up in her face. Chad, gulping, fought back tears.

‘I’m sorry I should never have-’

‘Shhh.’ Her voice, the whisper of sunlight on grass.

‘Battlefields are places for weapons. You use questions like weapons, as befits your name. Do you understand now?’

Chad, dizzy, felt the world slipping sideways. He thought, she touched me - inside – how –

He said, ‘I’m sorry-’

‘I don’t do regrets.’

‘No you don’t, do you?’ Chad, frowning. ‘You know, you use questions as weapons too. Well, not exactly weapons. Tools. It’s how they should be used, I suppose. To show us how far we’ve come. I can be a bit heavy handed, I imagine.’

‘ “To show us how far we’ve come...” ’

Her voice, pollen, apple blossom rain.

‘How far we’ve come from battlefields that were. How far yet to travel? And what fields of battle yet to cross?’

Chad, silent, found no words. But tears misted his sight.

‘How beautiful you are, Chad.’ Her hand, cupping his face. Her thumb, brushing aside moisture. ‘If a thing of war can be said to be beautiful.’

‘Am I a thing of war?’

‘We are what we are.’

‘I don’t feel like a warrior.’

‘I wonder how many warriors do?’

‘And there she goes, ahead of the pack, the girl with the glorious rhetoric...’

A moment hung between them.

‘Sorry. I just... I mean... oh heck. Sorry.’

‘War isn’t what you do Chad dear. It’s what you are.’

His hand lifting to cover hers, both resting double-hot against his cheek.

Leaning close, her lips brushed his.

‘A kiss on credit.’

Her voice, the world turning.

Chad, eyes jammed shut, felt a different sort of hole open in the world. For a moment, he fell in.

Her hand, falling from his cheek, left an icy imprint, slowly fading winter.

‘There’s something I don’t understand.’

‘Only one?’

‘There’s no way Brun replaced the lock. That’s a locksmith’s job – they don’t make them like that anymore, not out of chased silver. Anyway the etchings on the key-plate are the same as when we bought it. Just... I don’t know, newer somehow.’

‘As if time runs differently for the music box. Backwards maybe?’

Chad, stomach knotted, frowning.

‘How did she fix the lock, Ellyn? And where did she get that key from to open it?’

‘Did you see her use a key?’

‘Well, no but-’

A moment. The sun slipped beneath distant hills. The shadow of the earth engulfed them. Only the tops of the apple trees glowed with the last fire of the day, blossom rippling, inverted lava.

Ellyn, her voice fading slowly. ‘Keys lie, Chad.’

‘Tell that to the locksmiths of the world.’

‘Locks don’t lie.’ Softly. ‘They only have one job, you see. In-out. And-or. Logic gates. Locks are simple things. Easily made, easily remade.’

Chad, sighing. ‘Whereas keys on the other hand…?

Ellyn, nodding slowly. ‘Much harder to find.’

‘You mean make.’

Her eyes, uptilted, flashing softly. ‘You think a key is an object made by men to perform a certain function. To mate with a certain lock, one half of the same tool.’ Colder. ‘A key is not a tool. A key is intention. A shape cut out of the future. No,’ her voice, darker now, matching the fiery shadows. ‘Wrenched out of the future. Like a hunter’s prey, grasped desperately and wrenched from its life. And just as the death of an animal leaves a gap in its species, so using a key leaves a hole in the future. The holes are small and they heal quickly. But they are there.’

Chad shivered, mind locked on a ruined church, impossible brambles, a hand that wouldn’t let go.

He thought, there’s a hole in the world alright. But it’s not in the future. It’s right here, right now. A hand came out of it and grabbed me!

Ellyn, nodding, her face edged with a dark smile.

Chad, realisation blooming with the sound of distant machinery. ‘There’s a hole in the world, you said. It’s in that church. But it’s not in the future. It’s now. And if a key made now can rip a hole in the future, then one made in the past could’ve torn a hole right here and... oh-’

Chad, faltering. ‘Oh...’

A moment hung between them, crystal perfection, a fragment of light caught on a dragonfly's shimmering wing.

'It's the key. The key to the Symphonion.'

Chad, plunging madly through mind-forests filled with apple blossom and the teeth-jarring whine of distant machinery.

'I can see it, right now. A picture in my head, clear as day. Chased silver, like the lock. I'm right aren't I? The key to the Symphonion is the key that made the hole in the church.'

Ellyn, smiling in the ever deepening shadow of the earth, said nothing.

'Someone made that key, in the past. A symbol of their intention, like you said. And making it tore a hole in the future. Their future. But my present day.'

Chad, chest wrapped in apple-blossom ice. 'Now something's found that hole. Something that wants to escape into our world. Something that won't stop until it does. What is it, Ellyn? What is it? And what will it do when it gets through?'

Chapter 12

Chad, roused early from a restless night filled with unremembered dreams, awoke to the sound of a woman's voice.

A heartbreaking melody, like distant bells or melting ice, not yet pure but approaching perfection.

Fragile motifs, broken, gradually assembling themselves into a whole melody, a song rebuilding itself in the cool, fresh sunlight of morning.

Chad, listening, lay perfectly still. He thought, if I move I'll break it.

As he lay, an idea drifted through his mind.

Time runs differently for the music box. Backwards maybe?

The idea, once Ellyn's, now taking on a life of its own.

The melody, not melting ice, but ice slowly forming. Motifs like fractured sunlight on scattered pools of water, freezing together as winter came.

A song, long dead, determined to be sung back into life.

A song of power, and his sister the singer.

Chad, moon-tide wrapped in a boy, surged from his bed. The kitchen was cold, slate floor icy against his bare feet, the back door flung wide to admit warm air filled with the scent of apple-blossom.

'Brun!'

She turned, backlit by summer, hair a halo, smile a glimpse of winter.

'Brun, stop it! Stop singing! That song, it's dangerous-'

Her lips, parting, shaped a further motif, the sound like distant bells.

‘Brun! Come on, I’m serious, stop mucking about-’

Her lips closed, her voice stilled. A moment hung between them, cold as the moon.

‘Don’t you like my song, Chad?’

‘It’s not your song. It’s hers. The girl in the music box. It should stay in her world. I don’t want it here. There’s no place for it here. It frightens me.’

Her eyes, cupping winter, pierced his.

‘Doesn’t it frighten you?’

‘It can’t frighten me. It is me.’ Eyes, distant now, filled with the white-blue of high places. ‘I’m lost, Chad. Lost in this world. But if I sing for long enough I’ll work it out, all of it, the whole melody, and then I’ll find myself. I’ll find us both. And then... oh-’

Brun, as if lost in memory, wrapped her arms about herself.

‘-and then...’

Her voice, lifting as if in song. ‘He’ll come back to me. You’ll come back to me. My lovely Chad. My lovely Baldur. And we’ll live forever in the world-tree as all the earth dies, and only our love will live...’

Chad, drowning in her voice, cried out.

‘Listen to yourself! You’re Brun! My sister! Your parents are missing and you should be worried about them, not obsessing about some stupid music box and some stupid story! How can you sing about love when Roger and Hjelle Miyake are- oh, hell, Brun, you know what I mean!’

‘Hell, Brun; Brun... hell.’ her voice, a mirror to his, exploring the words – the potential of the words.

Chad thought, as if the words were current. A current, and her sentence a tightly wrapped coil whirling helplessly in the grip of some unknown force.

He blinked and her eyes were space, stars whirling endlessly, blue-white fire. She grew somehow without ever moving. Her head seemed now to

scrape the low kitchen ceiling, her shoulders filling the door-frame. Outside the house the sunlight dimmed, sucked away - or, no, he thought, drained into her somehow and blue-shifted almost beyond visible range.

Chad, stepping backward, raised his hands defensively.

Brun, a glowing violet hole shaped like a girl, cut in the world.

Blue light perforated his skin, his fingers rendered X-ray photographs.

Chad felt himself falling, sucked forward like the sunlight, felt himself stretching out as if the atoms in his body were losing cohesion, caught in her gravity.

'You're Brun!' His voice, cotton thick, a muffled and ungainly lump of noise, peeling apart between them.

'My sister Brun! You write stories! You're going to win a Carnegie! I'm not going to lose you!'

Chad, leaning backwards to counteract the pull, ears clogged with a heartbreaking melody, thought he saw wheeling blue-white stars erupt from her eyes.

He cried aloud and covered his own.

The blue-white light penetrated easily, piercing his brain like the hum of distant machinery, filling him up.

Chad, scrambling backwards, thought, there's a universe in there. A whole universe, right there, inside my sister. No wonder she's lost-

Still the light came out of her, deep time filled with blue-white fire. Stars like choking swarms of fireflies, pouring though his clenched fists and his clenched eyes, through his mouth and nostrils, into him, filling him with a heartbreaking melody-

'Get out!' His voice, thin, peeled away. Almost no room inside for him now.

'Get out!'

'There's no room in me for you!'

'Get out I'm too small I'M TOO SMALL!'

A spike of fire, cold blue yet hot as the sun, drove him to his knees.

He screamed aloud.

Two syllables, all he could muster against the light.

Ellyn.

Ellyn, and her eyes like winter fire, her lips lava against his own.

Her name drove the blue-white brilliance to darkness.

Chad, peering between parted fingers, watched star-glare fading from her eyes.

The universe withdrew, reluctantly, and she was just Brun again, just his sister.

Chad, falling a long yard to the floor, uttered a sound between a laugh and a sob. Frost rimed floorboards bit against his cheek. A tear froze there.

'I'm going to the junk shop.'

Brun, her voice still winter.

'The Junkman said we could pick up the disks for the Symphonion today.'

A cold moment.

'Won't you come with me?'

'I want... ' Chad, sighing harshly, lost his words with the breath.

'Don't you want to hear it play?'

'I want to go to the police station. Roger and HM, remember? I want to find out what they're doing. You should too.'

Her voice, dripping ice. 'Don't forget to get dressed will you? You'll look pretty silly making a complaint in your pyjamas.'

She walked out into the morning sunlight.

Chad, looking up, saw her walk out of focus, become a dark willow-blob that seeped away into the sunlight.

He scrambled weakly to his feet, collapsed again into a nearby chair. Leaning his forehead on the kitchen table, feeling not the grain of rough wood but something smoother and softer, Chad lifted his eyes.

The kitchen, lighter now, the warm yellow glow of sunlight inching cautiously within.

He blinked. A static charge prickled his skin. He held out a hand.

Apple blossom clung to his fingers.

More blossom duned in the kitchen, choking the sink, cold flakes laying thickly on the draining board and cupboards, a rippling plain across the hob.

Ellyn's words rolled through his mind, a summer storm or the broken hum of distant machinery.

Forces are polarising.

The words were still with him an hour later, outside the police station. He hesitated on the step, summer posies in full bloom before windows, frosted glass like blank eyes, snapshot of a boy. What would Ron think if he pushed the point about Roger and HM? He knew it was right, but somehow it still felt wrong. He knew the police would be doing all they could. But still he felt that wasn't enough...

Chad, resolved, moved up the steps.

'I wouldn't bother.'

Ellyn, her voice the flickering hum of dragonflies threading high street chatter.

Chad, turning, raised one eyebrow.

Sergeant Ron's off sick. Tinnitis. There's a replacement. Peripatetic. He's not very friendly.'

'I'm supposed to wait for-'

'Brun met Vincent and went to the museum.'

'She said she was going to the junk shop.'

‘Open afternoons only on Saturday.’

‘Oh.’

Traffic meandered past, humming.

‘Have you been to the museum Chad?’

Chad, sighing. ‘Not since your dad dug up the Viking, no. They have an exhibit don’t they? I’m sure it’s what Brun went there to see.’

‘Sarcasm doesn’t become you, Chad.’

‘Now you sound just like her.’

‘There’s a reason for that.’

‘Forces are polarising, right?’

A lorry double-parked alongside them, bringing the scent of fresh bread and exhaust fumes.

‘Do you have plans for today?’

‘Beyond worrying myself sick about absentee parents, you mean?’

Ellyn, eyes narrowed, studied Chad closely.

‘Something happened to you this morning. What was it?’

‘Don’t you know?’ Chad, turning, stumped angrily along the pavement.

‘I thought you knew everything.’

Ellyn, feet and voice keeping pace.

‘I have design tolerances.’

‘Like any good metal detector.’

‘That’s not very friendly is it?’

‘To be honest, I’m not feeling very friendly.’

Ellyn, thinking past several shop fronts, said finally, ‘The museum’s this way.’

Chad, huffing impatiently, shook his head.

‘When are you going to learn, Ellyn? I’m not interested in following my sister and her stupid boyfriend. I don’t care what they’re up to. My parents are missing. I have more important things to do. Why am I so important to you anyway? Just because you kissed me doesn’t mean I’ll follow you around like a-’

‘You want answers don’t you?’

Her voice, the sharp sting of ice.

‘You’ve wanted them for days, I can tell. Maybe longer. Maybe your whole life. Come with me and you might get what you want.’

‘For crying out-’

Chad, stopping dead on the street, fixed Ellyn with a bad-tempered glare. ‘Tell me why you burned your father’s shop down. Do that and I’ll go to the museum.’

Chad, waiting.

‘Come on. Fair exchange is no robbery.’

Ellyn, her face seeming to dim, as if somehow outracing the sunlight, said nothing.

‘Well?’ His voice, insistent.

‘Not here.’

‘Where then? As if I didn’t know.’

The town museum, yin to the world’s yang, waited, cold stone dressed in warm sunshine at the end of a half mile walk. Inside the differences continued. Small rooms, Not marble but carpeted wood for the floors; not wood but waxed brass for the rails. Display cabinets, a glass maze, nestled in silence. Inside the cases: flotsam and jetsam; detritus of a small town’s history, left-overs washed up on time’s lonely shore.

‘You should have brought your metal detector.’

‘Brass, wood, stone; bone, paper and glass.’ Her voice, a gentle current, resonated softly in the bright rooms.

‘All shaped by the same tidal force.’

‘Like the houses.’

‘My grey tide. From the Crown. You remembered.’

‘How could I forget?’ Chad, frowning, regarded ornaments and tools. ‘You’re clever and deep.’ Flakes of iron. Shreds of bone. ‘On days when you’re not weird, anyway.’ Beads of glass. Cracked pottery dyed blue and grey and cream. ‘What’s this particular tide, then? Invention? Ingenuity?’

‘Mind.’

‘A conceptual tide.’

‘The conceptual and the physical relate.’

‘As in: why did you burn your dad’s shop down?’

‘Maybe I was just in search of a good metaphor.’ Ellyn, smiling at history, or, no – past history at some place more distant still.

‘The special exhibit gallery is this way.’

Footsteps on carpet, muffled tread, threading deeper into the glass maze.

Chad, following, tracked rippled glass-ghosts.

‘We’re fencing again.’

‘Don’t you like it?’

‘That’s not the point. Not for you, anyway, is it?’

‘Forces are polarising, Chad.’

Chad, mind trapped in a vision of his sister drawn in dazzling blue-white lines, thought, you don’t need to remind me of that.

He said, ‘Are we polarising?’

‘That depends.’

‘Of course it does.’ Chad, irritated.

‘Are we forces?’

‘Isn’t everything? I mean, everything made of matter anyway? What about the forces holding atoms together?’

‘What about the forces holding time together?’

‘Well what do you know?’ Frustration. ‘A circular conversation.’

‘Like the aurora borealis. Or the disks for a music box.’

‘Here he is, the star attraction.’ Chad, thankful for even a temporary end to her circularity, read aloud from a placard.

‘The Ice Man.’

He rested in glass, a giant, skin stretched grey and papery over wasted muscle, eyes closed, body wrapped in leather, cloth, iron, bone; ornaments and tools. A bronze helmet crowned twisted braids of hair, a shape worked skilfully into the metal above the high, grooved forehead. A dragonfly... no a dragon, sideways on and rearing, eye socket brimming with a single amber tear. Lower: sword, axe, dagger, shield; chased steel and split wood. His lips, parted in a half smile. Expectation maybe.

‘It’s a model, right? He seems as if... as if he’s looking forward to something. A battle maybe, or maybe someone he was going to meet after a battle... a wife or lover... I wonder how he got in the ice. Oh-’

Chad, tide-swept among the information displays in nearby cases, fell silent.

‘Surprised?’ Ellyn, her voice dim, receding, somehow blue-shifted. ‘He’s real. The actual figure they unearthed.’

‘Tell me.’ Chad, urgently. ‘Right now. I want to trust you. But I have to know.’

Ellyn, remembering, moved away, circling display cases, visible then invisible, half seen through rippled glass.

‘We had a deal.’

Her face, winter glimpsed through a dust streaked window, peered out from half a dozen sheets of glass. Her lips, moving, silent behind invisible barriers.

He moved away from the Ice Man, following her deeper into the maze.

The smell of new carpet and waxed brass clung to the wooden fixtures and glass panels.

Stone. Leather. Wood. Iron. Bone. Glass.

He thought, like the junk shop. Fossils of other people's lives.

Ellyn, drifting, ebbed and flowed through history's tide. Her words, fluxing, eddies in the current.

'I'm lost in a maze. Memories and histories. Right now and yesterday and tomorrow, all mixed up together, like rocks in the ground. Strata, neat deposit, smashed by earthquakes. Time's crazy paving.'

Chad, following, let her speak.

'Dad was restoring a building. He had a team there, down in the ground, under the basement. Some tunnels they'd found. There was some thought of turning them into a tourist attraction. I was there too. I shouldn't have been. He never said so, but we both knew the rules. I had my metal detector. I was... I don't know, looking for the past. Thought I was, anyway. For coins, or keys. Maybe for a key to the present. It wasn't working out you see. The present. I had plans. I wanted to be a surgeon. Dad didn't want that. He said hands like mine should be used to save the past. A life was just a life, he said. Any one just one of billions. But the past... well, the past was unique. There was only one of it.'

Ellyn, rippling, face and voice folded through glass.

'Even then it was happening. We were polarising. We just didn't know it. We would argue. I was drawn to him and repelled by him. That's normal though. It probably would have been alright. Things would have worked themselves out. Then he found the ice deposit. After that everything changed.'

Chad, shivering, felt dank air move against his face. Felt the darkness press in against him coldly. Far off along the dark tunnels of memory came a distant hum, like broken machinery thudding far out across the sea. He thought, she's like a tide, washing us back to that day. If the current's too strong we'll never get back.

'When they exposed the ice I was there. I remember the members of the team shouting excitedly and running about. No-one really took any notice

of me. I sneaked up to the place where they were working. A whole wall had come down. There was a huge sheet of ice there, grey green like a slab of sea, just hanging there in the wall. No-one wanted to touch it. There were shapes inside. A shape, rather. When I got up close I saw it was a hand. A hand buried in fog like frosted glass. A hand reaching out to me. I couldn't see anything else. The arm seemed to recede into the distance, the way things do underwater. Light moved differently there. I knew... I felt there was a whole body there, not just an arm. My metal detector was whining, screaming almost. There was metal in there too. Lots of it. I... I... did something stupid.'

Ellyn, tide-locked, drifted through a maze of glass, her face a ghost-shape, half seen. Here an eye, there an ear, a slice of cheek or nose or neck, mosaic of a girl, new flotsam on history's beach.

'You touched it.'

Chad, driven by the current of her words, followed helplessly.

'I tried to. And for a moment it was as if the ice between us didn't exist. I felt skin, muscle, bone.'

'It moved!' Chad, mind suddenly trapped in a church full of impossible brambles.

'Tried to grab you!'

'No!' Calmer. 'Not that. But something... something happened. I saw stars. Later they said I fainted. They said I hit my head. I don't faint. Chad. I saw the universe.'

'Ellyn.'

'A universe of stars. People made of stars. People... oh, Chad, you can't imagine how beautiful, people made of blue-white fire, loving, hating, dancing, fighting.'

'Ellyn!'

Chad, stroking hard with the current, floundered suddenly, nostrils choked on the scent of apple blossom, ears clogged with the piercing hum of distant machinery. He thought, I have to reach her, right now, before we both drown in her memories…

But all he found were reflections, all he touched were pale, colourless images, memories of where she had been, ghosts in a maze of glass. And now he was drowning in her words, sucked down by the tide, battered and torn upon reefs of history.

‘It was too much, Chad. Too big. It got into my head and I couldn’t get it out! The universe was in my head and I couldn’t get it out!’

Her voice, broken, drowned in tears as the tide, finally, drove them together. Between islands of wood framed glass they met, touched, her skin warm and whole again, the colour in her cheeks blooming with memory.

‘All those people... beautiful people... people made of starfire...’

He held her. She burned him.

‘It was too much, Chad. I wasn’t big enough. They filled me up. Their deeds, their wars, their hate, their love. Too much! I reached out and touched them, but I was just a kid, and they filled me up, and there was no room left for me.’

Her face, burning, shone like the sun from within.

‘No room left for me.’

The light of memory, nova bright, beautiful, deadly.

‘I died.’

‘I died, Chad, I know I did.’

‘I died... and then I came back.’

Ellyn, writhing, boiled against him. Her arms like clock springs, unwinding suddenly with all the power of time. Chad, brushed aside by the force, crashed against a glass case and slid to the ground.

‘Ellyn!’

She fell, uncoiling madly.

Her voice, a wet screech, clogged by foam.

-drowning, she’s drowning, I was too late-

‘Ellyn! Help! Ellyn!’

Chad, fighting the current, crawled back to her.

'Ellyn! Somebody help!'

But he was alone, tide-locked, and the current was carrying her away.

Chad, unable to bear the awful noise, reached out to her face, touched it. Her hands battered his face and chest. He felt nothing but a distant ringing sound, like a crowd of voices shouting in a language he almost knew far away along a dark tunnel.

Then somehow his fist was in her mouth, her teeth locked into his flesh. He screamed, heard nothing but machinery. The pain was the scent of apple blossom, and he was drowning, drowning-

Then nothing.

Silence.

The gentle lap of breath against life's shore.

'Chad...'

Ellyn, weak, her voice, still clogged.

Chad stared down at the teeth marks on his hand.

'Epileptic. You never told me you were-'

'I never used to be. I mean, only since- oh, your hand. Did I bite you?'

'Forget it.'

'I'll never forget it. You probably saved my life. Was I choking?'

'I don't remember.'

A moment hung between them, filled with blood and starfire.

'Ever since I came back things have been different. Everything's weird now. People are scared of me. It's like they can see something in me. Something even I can't. They shun me, Chad, I'm a pariah. They stone me with words and run from me in fear when they can't attack.'

Her head, falling against his shoulder, solid, the warmth of flesh marred by the cold plastic hearing aid. Her glasses were gone, scattered somewhere

across the carpet. Her eyes, naked, were beautiful.

'Everyone, Chad. Everyone except you.'

Her lips, stained with blood, touched his cheek.

'The starfire I saw, the burning people. I can't get them out of my head. I long for them Chad. Yearn for them. It's why I burned down my father's place. I wanted to bring back the fire. Bring it back – and be part of it again.'

Her voice, infinitely sad.

'But it's you they burn for, you they desire. Why do you think I was crying when you first saw me? They're in love with you, Chad. They want you back. Wherever they are, wherever they live. It's you they want, not me!'

Her words, pounding, the thump of broken machinery far away across distant hills. But Chad, leaning against wood-framed glass, saw only an ancient hand, mummified by cold, gloved in time. The hand of the Ice Man that reached out to both of them across a heaving sea of memory. And as her words crashed against him, imagination put flesh on the bones, hung dirt on the skin, a dragon-ring on the index finger, clothed all in a fingerless leather mitten.

The hand of the Ice Man was the hand from the church, reaching out of a hole in the world to grasp and hold, and never let go.

Chapter 13

‘You were at the museum? Hey. Us too. We never saw you. Did you see the Ice Man? What a great exhibit. Really inspiring. You know – from a writer’s point of view.’

Chad, listening with half an ear to his sister, examined the farmhouse kitchen for signs of this morning’s vision. Nothing. No- not quite. A single apple blossom, stubborn snow flake, frost-glued to the cold tap.

‘I thought I saw a necklace in the photographs that were taken on site. Just a shadow in the ice, really. A necklace like mine with amber stones in a gold chain. It wasn’t in the museum exhibit. Maybe it’s being restored.’

Chad, frowning, regarded his sister suspiciously. He thought, maybe he isn’t wearing it because you are.

Moving past Brun he glanced back towards Ellyn, seated at the kitchen table. ‘Hot chocolate?’

‘I wouldn’t bother.’

Brun, her voice splintering, fractured ice.

‘No milk?’

‘No gas.’

Chad, staring at the hob, saw ice on the gas jets. The ice, white folded in blue, sprayed from the jet nozzles, four frozen crowns, perfect. He thought, as if the fire just froze right up; ice crowns for a dead princess.

‘Don’t bother. I feel fine now anyway.’

Her voice, glass paper, making her words a lie.

‘Are you sure?’ Vincent, leaning casually against the kitchen door. ‘You look pale, Ellyn. Maybe you should get a check-up to be safe.’

‘I just threw a fit, alright? It’s nothing to get scared of. Anyway Chad stopped me choking. I’m fine now.’

‘Yeah, Chad, how about that?’ Vincent, moving across the kitchen. ‘You’re a genuine hero. How’s your hand?’

Chad, turning away, stuffed his hand into his pocket.

‘Fine, thanks.’

‘Anyway, I’m glad you’re back.’ Brun, a moment of unexpected warmth punctuating the kitchen.

‘Vincent and I went to the junk shop. We got the disks for the Symphonion. There were two. We put them in an old record sleeve for safety.’ Brun, ghost of a smile at her lips. ‘Guy Mitchell. She Wears Red Feathers and a Hooly Hooly Skirt.’ The smile, fading. ‘He’d only found one key though.’

It lay on the table. It was larger than expected, chased silver once gone to verdigris, splines lathered in rust, now polished as if new. Chad, staring, felt drawn in, as if the key had a weight, a gravity, far beyond its size and material.

‘The Junkman wanted my necklace, can you believe it? He tried to trade it for the Symphonion key but I wasn’t having that. I bet it’s worth a fortune.’

Chad, frowning, stared at the key. The edges of the splines were angled in a way he’d never seen before. He thought, as if it were a key made to turn only one way. To unlock, but never lock again.

‘Would you like to see the disks?’

Chad, suddenly angry, said, ‘No thanks. I’d rather concentrate on what to do about dad and HM.’

‘Chad, what can we do? We’ve reported them to the police. Now we have to wait. Anyway, it’s only been a day.’

‘A day, a week, a month. They’re still our parents and they’re still

missing. And what do you want to do Brun? Shove your stupid disks in your stupid music box and listen to some stupid music, that's what!'

'Hang on mate, don't you think you're being-'

Chad, interrupting. 'As a matter of fact, Vincent, I do think. I'm pretty sure I'm the only one here who hasn't forgotten how to. Brun's floozing around like the Ice Princess when she should be worrying about dad and HM, and you – you seem happy to let her! You should know better. And while we're at it, look at the hob. Am I the only one to realise that flame can't turn to ice in a million years?'

'I expect it's condensation. Freak atmospherics. Never fear, it'll melt soon and then you can have your cup of tea.'

'Tea?' Chad, exasperated, thumped the kitchen table. 'Am I the only one not behaving like a big kid?'

'I'm not behaving like any kind of princess.'

'That's rubbish and you know it. You've been obsessing about that music box ever since we found it. Wandering around, humming that stupid tune. "Harmonic content," my Sainted Aunt! You've spent your whole time cleaning and polishing and restoring. What about your story? What about your songs, Brun? No wonder your notebooks are full of empty pages.'

'Actually that's not true, mate. I read some just the other day. Your sister's got tons of books full of story. It's pretty good too.'

'Open your eyes.'

Chad, glancing scornfully at Vincent.

Brun, her voice mid-winter. 'The reason my words don't exist for you is because you don't believe in them. You won't see what's in front of you, Chad. You're a daydreamer, you always have been. One day you're going to see what's right in front of you, and then you're going to get such a shock!'

'What's right in front of me? I'll tell you what's right in front of me! These stupid things!'

Chad, tearing the record sleeve, sweeping it from the kitchen table to reveal twin disks. Perforated metal, the disks looked like nothing more than

circular cheese-graters. The metal was corroded, dark oil-colours smeared across neat patterns of holes.

‘Oh I expect they’ll need a little work, eh, sis? A little elbow grease? How long will it take before these lumps of rust will be as shiny and new as the locks on the Symphonion?’

Brun, responding, words lost in the force of his rage.

Chad, hurricane boy, said, ‘Hey Ellyn, I wonder what your metal detector would make of these? Would we even be able to tune into this metal, do you suppose?’

There was no reply.

‘Ellyn?’

Chad, turning.

‘She’s gone. Chad.’ Vincent, calmly.

‘She left a few minutes ago.’

Brun added, coldly, ‘You scared her off.’

Chad, turning, faced torment after torment.

‘Alright. That’s the way you want to play it. Everything’s my fault. Well let’s get your story straight. Let’s blame me for something that really is my fault, shall we?’

Chad, scattering table-junk, ran from the kitchen.

‘Let’s just put a disk on and have a little boogie, shall we? Get it out of your system and then we can concentrate on the important issues like finding dad and HM!’

‘Chad!’

Her voice, fading into the distance.

‘Chad wait, it’s not time!’

Chad, entering the lounge with key and disk.

Crossing the lounge, strides unfelt, body numb, nostrils clogged with the

scent of apple-blossom.

The Symphonion, resting on its half-moon table, gleamed coldly, lacquered wood and chased silver mating in motionless silence.

Chad, reaching for the lid of the Symphonion.

Miles behind and blue-shifted, her voice.

‘Chad no! It’s locked, you can’t-’

The lid, oiled and eager, opened smoothly at his touch.

‘Chad please!’

Brun, gasping, lifted hands to her face, as if in pain.

‘Chad!’

The disk, scraping skin, socketed neatly into place.

‘Please Chad! It’s not time-’

Chad, grasping the winding handle, heard nothing but the piercing whine of distant machinery. One turn. Two. He jammed the new key into the lockplate.

‘Right you piece of junk. It’s time to sing for your supper.’

Mind and flesh, gripping, mated with silver and wood.

The key moved, a short arc.

The world went mad.

The Symphonion, unfolding, blocks on blocks, silver burning out to dazzling glare, lacquer work fading to a dull amber glow. Starfire, erupting from every line and angle, and the world the hazy blue of an X-ray. The scent of apple-blossom clogged his nostrils and the piercing whine of distant machinery smashed into his head.

‘Chaaaaaaaaaaa-!’

Her voice, an echo, caught in fog – or smoke.

Chad turning, the

(sword)

winding handle

(sword)

a dead weight in his hand.

‘Brun-’

She was gone.

The world was gone.

Chad, stumbling, sword a dead weight.

Gripping a tree stump for support.

(flash)

No stump but a chair. A throne of corpses.

Blood. Bone. Muscle. Sinew.

Love. Hate Desire.

Axe. Cudgel.

Shield.

(flash)

At the foot of the throne, a man, a giant.

Armour split, cold now, and still.

Golden harp on a field of blue.

All gone to red, and no heart beat there.

(flash flash)

Circling the bloody wreckage, soldiers come.

Howling, they run the night in a wave.

Wolves run with them, quiet as death.

(flash flash flash)

Chad stands, no child but a man.

Axe and cudgel; hate and love.

Bare feet planted in the ruin of a King.

(FLASH)

The sword swings, arc of silver as the soldiers pass. Acceleration, a wrenching shock. A soldier falls, head hanging loose on strips of gristle.

Chad snarls, wordless pleasure.

A thousand soldiers run the night.

Chad stands, blood washed in foglight.

The nearest soldier, hunting, has marked him.

The Hunter moves; silver gleaming dully, dragon emblem burning above full moon helmet eyes, a twin to the ring Chad himself wears.

The Hunter moves; rumble of leather, iron, bone. Feet shake the earth. Braids of hair uncoil, tree branches in high wind. The dragon emblem gleams, amber eye burning, a beacon of intention.

The Hunter moves; shuttered night dressed in firefly silver, tide of axe and dagger, flaying skin, leather and steel.

(flash)

The Hunter howls.

Wolves, running.

(flash)

Chad, breathing smoke and fire.

Screams and blood.

(flash)

Chad swings.

A wolf, falling.

Teeth, piercing leather and flesh.

He swings.

Wolf's head, falling, the body a dead weight.

The Hunter, striding closer, feet shaking the ground.

Chad, screaming, back to stone, a blood-washed crag.

In the smoke bound darkness, a thousand eyes.

Wolves, running the night.

Their bodies the weight of the world.

Chad, pressed against the crag, forced to his knees.

Blood-stained, canines seek his neck.

Chad, howling, twists, thrusts.

A wolf falls, burning silver in one burning eye.

Chad, bleeding, swings again, flesh ragged.

Another wolf falls, and the axe with it.

The Hunter-

(thud)

-strides-

(thud)

-closer-

A wolf jaw clamps home; another, another.

Fire, running in his chest, his cheek.

Chad howls.

Sinks craggy teeth into matted fur.

Saws violently with his trapped sword arm.

Wolves, silent snarl, take better grip.

Blood, black river in the starlight.

The Hunter-

(thud-THUD!)

-strides-

(thud-THUD!)

Chad howls-

The Hunter lifts-

-his love-

-his axe-

‘FREYA! MY LOVE!’

Chad, betrayed, his voice a summer storm.

‘IN MY WEALTH SHALL NO MAN DELIGHT!’

The Hunter, betrayed, his voice the dying of the earth.

-my lost heart beats-

The axe, an arc of silver in the burning darkness.

-for thee! Only for-

Silver, bright as the sun, bites home.

Chad, coiled knot of boy, fell writhing.

His voice, clogged, breath and screams mangled together, smashed strata and pain the quake.

‘Chad-’

Her voice, unheard.

‘-listen to me it’s-’

Chad, wrapped in himself, shuddered.

‘-me, Ellyn, you’re alright it’s over now so just-’

Chad, convulsing, cried out.

‘Freya! My heart!’

The words, a sickness thrust from him, banished swords and screams and fireflesh into memory.

Chad, gasping, rolled onto his back.

Uncoiling, he saw blue sky, hot yellow sun; a pale face with glassed eyes, an ear clogged with plastic.

‘Ellyn. What-’

His fists, gripping not carpet but grass, jerked handfulls free as he rose. Kneeling, eyes blinked, focused.

‘Where-’

‘The Crown. We’re on the Crown, don’t you remember? We came here after you-’

He thought, crown of flame. Crown of Icefire. Crown for a dead Princess-

‘-argued, we... about... disk. That’s right... I... put disk in... music box... saw... oh... how... get here-? How long-?’

‘Hours Chad. We’ve been here all afternoon.’

‘All... afternoon? But... it was just... I mean, I just... ‘

Chad, shivering, found himself bundled in a coat.

‘Cold.’

His voice, wondering.

One hand, raising, his fist gripped frost glazed grass.

Pollen, glued to his skin, gloved his hand.

Forces.

Polarising. Forces.

‘Start again. Tell me... everything.’

‘You and Brun were arguing so I left. I came here to think. You found me here a couple of hours ago. Something’s happening, Chad. Look at the bay.’

Metal, a cold weight in his hand. Sword? No - binoculars. Dully, he raised them to his eyes.

‘That’s impossible!’

His voice, sharp in the sunlight.

‘Chad, what happened after I left you?’

Chad, lost in wonder, swept the glasses from left to right.

Fishing boats, paralysed by duned white floes.

Tiny figures, sailors bundled in winter coats.

‘It’s impossible,’ Chad, broken record.

‘It’s the middle of summer.’

The bay was full of ice.

‘That’s not all. Look!’

Ellyn, holding polaroids up to the horizon.

‘The clouds are moving again.’

Chad, fingers numb, raised binoculars.

Ellyn was right.

The ring of cloud walling the horizon was moving as he watched, piling up into towering forms.

Ellyn, stood, wrenching him upright, whirling him in a circle.

‘They’re all around us.’

Chad, wondering, said, ‘Eighteen. There’s eighteen of them.’ His eyes, holding hers through streaked glass.

‘Eighteen, Ellyn. You see? Eighteen towers of cloud. Eighteen stroke victims. Eighteen amber tears on Brun’s necklace.’

‘You’re right.’

Her voice, softly penetrating.

On the shore, children hurled snowballs.

He raised the binoculars again.

‘And look! Sails.’

She took the binoculars.

‘Square sails like Viking ships. One beneath each tower of cloud. They weren’t there an hour ago.’

‘Eighteen sails.’

Chad, turning, his hand moving the binoculars from her face.

‘If the sea is frozen how can they sail?’

‘Maybe they’re on sleds.’

‘With dogs?’

Or wolves.

‘That’s enough fun and games.’

Chad, waking now, worried the puzzle as a dog worries fresh kill.

‘I argued with Brun, put a disk on the Symphonion. The world went

mad. I was fighting in a great battle. Two great armies... two battles at the same time... sheafed wars overlaid like hospital X-rays. One war was man against man... the other... gods against giants... giants made of ice. Vikings... giants... I think... I was in love... in love with someone called Freya.'

In my wealth shall no man delight.

'The girl in the music box.'

Her voice, winter sky, cold and clear.

The planes of her face, starfire and heart's blood.

'There were wolves, fighting with the giants. One of them ate the sun. The world was full of ice. It was the end. The end of everything. I died there. I felt the blade inside me. Viking killing Viking. Cold inside me, and hard, like betrayal. A Hunter killed me Ellyn, and then a Wolf ate the sun, and the world died too.'

'A vision.'

'A memory.'

Chad, lost in time's maze, corrected her.

'A memory of something very real.'

A moment hung between them, filled with the scent of apple blossom. A single flake of snow came out of a sullen sky, settled on his cheek. He wiped it away with a finger, like a tear.

'I think you should tell me what you know, Ellyn. I think you should tell me right now before something really bad happens. Because try as I might, I can't help thinking something really bad is going to happen here. And sooner rather than later. Much sooner, if you want the truth.'

Ellyn nudged her glasses back up the bridge of her nose.

Chad, waiting.

'They were lovers.' Ellyn, lips pursed against the cold.

'Lovers out of time.'

Chad, eyes locked and her the key.

Ellyn, turning, her gaze fixed on a more distant horizon.

‘They made a key.’

Her voice, splintered ice.

‘Their love tore a hole in the future. A big hole.’

Chad, shivering, felt a shadow move across his heart.

‘They took the end of the world and put it in a music box.’

‘When you played the disk you let it out.’

Something took Chad then, a kind of madness, and he turned away from her, away from the last gleam of summer, a prisoner of her eyes and smile. The landward slope of the Crown rolled away from him, white on white, tide of fog-cloaked snow rolling in to cover the town, white surf topping a grey tide of buildings.

No no no no no!

The words an engine, pumping him into an impossible future, and Chad, running white, punching through cloud pollen, thunderclap memory and a head full of bad ideas, boy shape stamped out of an impossible day, limbs poisoned soon by running.

Can’t be - snowing. It’s - middle of – summer!

Chad, body churning, crashed in grass turned to frost. Bushes, fragile, perfect sculptures, crackled and snapped, disintegrating at the touch of his weight, his warmth.

-Frostfire. Frostfire! Ice crown for a dead Princess-

And through everything a bittersweet melody, pure, like church bells or freezing ice, condensing on his breath out of the fog, out of the snow.

The song of the Symphonion.

A melody which rose until he pressed hands to his ears and screamed with the pressure of it, scooped handfuls of snow and rammed them, freezing, into his ears to block the sound, but still the song filled him, every

pore, every gap between atoms, clogging, choking, until there was nothing left, no room for him, just the song, and he was on his knees, then his belly, rolling in the snow, screaming from sheer violation, but his voice, even that, was the sound of the music box, and still it rose and swelled and burst inside him, crescendo after crescendo, tier after tier of melody and harmony, rhythm and counterpoint, until even his screams were subsumed in the music, made part of it, absorbed and incorporated into the ever growing structure of it as easily as a drop of water is incorporated into the ever growing design of a freezing snowflake; until there was nothing left of him at all, just a boy-shaped scream drifting in a universe of X-ray blue stars, and every star a dragonfly note in the song of the Symphonion, reaching out into space forever.

And Chad, silent, at last was gone.

No – not quite.

Some part of him registered a feeling, a hole in the firmament of music he had become, an undeniable sensation, of fingers grasping, of a hand reaching out of a hole in the world to grab him and pull him, unresisting, back from infinity.

Back, along an endless tunnel peopled with distant voices shrieking in a language he almost knew; back, across a broken tide of architecture and landscape made one like an X-ray photograph; back, through the heart-rending maze of melody and the overpowering scent of apple blossom snow; back, to-

-his room.

-his room in the farmhouse.

-and he was Chad again, just Chad, weeping from the razor beauty of the song, threading a maze of insane memories to emerge, gasping for breath, heart an anvil in his chest and relief the hammer, folded like an Egyptian Mummy in layer after layer of sweat soaked bedclothes, cocooned, struggling, on the floor of his room in the farmhouse.

The farmhouse!

He jerked upright, peering from the window into the snow-filled sky. No – not snow – just pollen. Just an early morning summer sky filled with the promise of warm sunshine and the scent of apple blossom drifting in from the orchard.

'Snow-' His voice, choking, an engine and no fuel. '-ice in the bay – cloudsails coming – wolves – eating the sun-!'

'Hey champ, take it steady. If that's your dream it's an Olympic gold medal winner.'

The voice – and the fingers clamped in a friendly grip about his arm – no grimy dragon-ringed hand reaching out from a forgotten hole in an empty church to grab and hold, but a warm and familiar presence, friendly, supporting.

'Dad!'

'In the flesh.'

'Dad – HM – is she-'

'Downstairs. The racket you were making I'm surprised anyone could-'

'Is it snowing? Dad – is it snowing?'

'Snowing?' His laugh, somehow unsettling. 'On this planet it's the middle of July remember?'

'Yeah. Yeah, I remember.'

Chad, gathering strength, pushed himself up onto the bed. 'Dad, it's been ages. You didn't come back. Where have you been?'

'Ages?'

'Yeah, we went to the police and everything.'

'Police?'

Frost dusted his father's voice.

'Why would you want to do that?'

‘We were worried! Me and Brun.’

‘Worry? Why you prize chump, there’s no need for worry! Come on. Grab some clothes and I’ll stand us a treat. A picnic! We’ll take the kites up to the Crown. What do you say to that?’

Chad, groping helplessly for a reply, found only silence.

With a friendly wink Roger bent to leave the room and Chad reached for his clothes.

‘Ow!’

The pain, sharp, chased pins and needles up his arm. Chad thought, like when you wrap a rubber band round your finger and it goes numb.

‘That’s odd.’

Chad, frowning, rubbed the tingling out of his arm, elbow to palm. His ring finger was last to come back to life and there a bloodless coil cut deeply into the flesh. A shape where none should be, the imprint curled like the tail of some animal... a dragon, say. A dragon ring. Like the ring on

(the Ice Man)

a gloved and bloody

(Viking Warrior)

hand in a church, reaching out from a hole in the world to grasp and hold, and never let him go.

A ring he had never worn.

Chapter 14

‘Peaches?’ Brun, her voice a happy bell. ‘Fantastic! This is a great picnic. Don’t you think Chad?’

Chad, hauling a basket half as big as himself, grunted in annoyance. Peaches. Pop. Sandwiches. He thought, What’s wrong with this picture?

Nothing. That was the problem. The Crown, basking, dressed in buttercups, a carpet of green-gold. A family of kites, sharp ribs and dark angles, snapped and scratched at the sky, strings wind-humming like high tension wires, like machinery far off across a distant horizon.

‘It must be a competition. I wonder if they’ll let us have a go.’ Roger and Hjelle Miyake, laughing at the kites like big kids as they strolled arm in arm, bookending Brun.

The three of them glowed.

Chad, searching landward and seaward horizons for the ice of yesterday’s dream, found only apple blossom, dandelions, the dart and buzz of dragonflies. The only music, the laughter of kites.

The ruined church stood small, its tower a tumbled reminder of history away across the fields. It’s walls, sun-washed, seemed warm, even inviting now. Beneath the Crown twin tides swelled and crashed; town and ocean, clothed in summer, no longer grey.

He thought, everything is getting further away. Like looking through the wrong end of a telescope. Everything you can see is miles off and yet... somehow... right next to you at the same time.

‘Where’s the Purser on this rust bucket anyway?’

Roger, booming, somehow out of synch.

‘Buck up laddo, I’m famished. Old age, I imagine.’

Hjelle Miyake, smiling like the sun, punched his arm.

‘Since when has forty six been old?’

‘For an ancient Briton 46 was the dizzy height of old age. No teeth. Skin like old motorbike leathers. Spooky godlike wisdom for the tribe. Etcetera.’

Hjelle Miyake, laughing. ‘Is it the respect you miss, dear?’

‘From this tribe? Can’t miss what you never had!’

‘Peaches.’

Chad, wheezing, dumped the heavy basket onto the grass.

‘As ordered.’

‘Sterling. First Mate and Second Wife, make ready the small boats, break out the booty and it’s every man, woman and child for themselves.’

‘I’m going to make a daisy chain.’ Brun, orbiting the group, fingers trailing in the long grass.

‘You already have a very nice necklace.’ Hjelle Miyake, her voice the persistence of summer.

‘Oh it’s not a necklace. It’s a crown.’

Her voice, dune-grass, and the wind exploring restlessly.

‘Recursion.’ Roger, amused. ‘A crown upon the Crown. Iteration. Chaos theory. Isn’t it a grand world where even the simplest picnic can aspire to the dizzying heights of science?’

‘Shut up, First Husband, and open the wine.’

‘Thus reinforcing the stereotypical gender role models for the more impressionable among us...’

‘Oh go fly a kite!’

‘Hm. I do believe I will. Stunt kiting was always my first love, you

know. Oh Mazzarati mine, how I spurn thy delicious chromium and faux leather embrace...'

Chad, freed from the heavy basket, drifted with the wind, pressed a boy-shaped hole in the long grass and lay there on his back, staring up at the sky and the kites. He thought, too normal. They're just too normal. Why haven't they mentioned where they've been for the last three days? Why haven't they asked what we've been up to, if we were alright?

'For that matter, why haven't you asked where they were?'

Ellyn.

Chad, sitting up, scanned the long grass for her face. Suddenly he wanted to see her, talk to her of Viking warriors, wolves, a summer coastline choked with ice, a world without moon, sun, future.

'Ellyn?'

His hands, parting the long grass, revealing nothing beyond a greener darkness, a deeper tide. He sat up straighter, eyes peering over the grass, ears straining. Just wind, and the distant laughter of kites. Had he imagined her voice?

Then movement, a sharp hum, the noise of power lines buzzing with energy.

Dragonflies, winding out of the grass, hovered for a second directly in front of his face, then lunged.

Chad, yelling, tumbled backwards.

Sudden view of the sky, kites scratching the clouds.

The sun, driving spikes of light into his eyes.

The ground, whirling.

Dragonflies.

Kites.

'Hello Chad.'

'Brun!'

Inverted she hung before him, smiling faintly. Her fingers plucking, piercing, threading stalks. A daisy chain. No, not daisies. Buttercups. A wreath of jewels like amber tears, little pieces of sunlight caught on a verdigris chain.

'Hi.'

Chad, blinking, sat up and turned around. His sister assumed a more normal attitude.

'Er... how's the daisy chain coming?'

'You were calling out for Ellyn.'

Her voice, ice threading summer.

'You didn't tell me you were meeting her here.'

'I'm not. I just thought... oh never mind.'

Brun, threading.

'Anyway. Don't you think it's weird? Dad and Hjelle Miyake?'

'No. Why, do you?'

'Just in the way of a nine-bob note.'

'In life you have to take a few things on trust.'

'Oh. Really? I'd never have-'

Chad, frowning, fell silent. Something was-

(humming)

-up. Something was-

(humming like broken machinery far off across a distant horizon)

-wrong with the day.

The long grass was moving. Not in ripples as if pushed by the wind. All at once. He thought, like iron filings round a magnet. The grass quivered. Long stalks tipped inwards in a circle, every blade aiming itself like an arrow at him. No, not him. Brun.

Forces are polarising.

The humming increased, winding out from behind the grass, corkscrewing out of the verdigris currents, like broken machinery or – no, like dragonflies.

Emerging from between the long blades of grass they hung in a circle around the children, bodies motionless, wings a near-invisible glimmer. Chad glanced left and right, counting. Eighteen. Eighteen darkly iridescent bodies. Double that number of crystal eyes, all fixed on them. Chad felt cold. Overhead the daylight seemed to dim. He thought, it's like they're sucking up all the sunlight. As if it's all falling on them and not on us.

Darkness, a slow current, seeped out of the grass.

A wind, rising, tugged at Chad. He concentrated on remaining upright. He thought, I'll stand now. The grass isn't that high, only up to my knee. I'll get up so I can see over it. Then I can shout for help. Or run.

Something murmured in the grass. Like an army shouting in a language he almost knew, far away in the green-dark deeps.

Or fight.

Chad, standing quickly, frowned.

Surely the grass wasn't this high? Surely he should be able to see over it? But where was the church, the views of distant woodland, the town, the ocean? Where were Roger and Hjelle Miyake?

All he could see was a circular wall of grass, spear blades tipping inward like a stockade fence as if to prevent escape. Above that, the light at the top of a deep well, a circular patch of brilliant summer sky.

The humming increased. Now it sounded less like distant machinery and more like the wind humming in power lines. That or-

He narrowed his eyes.

Kite strings.

Chad, looking again, gasped. Something was-

Something was wrong with the sky.

Kites, moving in jagged arcs, swift tails cutting deep scratches in the sky. Where they moved the colour of summer drained, replaced by grey. Grey clouds. Grey sunlight. Chad, squinting, looked more closely. Not scratches. Wounds. The kites were eating the sky, laughing as they went with the sound of a high wind humming in their strings.

'Brun, come on, I think we'd better-'

'And Fenrir the wolf ate the moon and the sun and the summer of our love was made winter.'

Her voice, splintered ice, cut deeply across his words.

'And the giants came, men made of mountains, crowned with ice, and they made war in the bones of the earth.'

Chad, startled, gaze tumbling from the impossible sky.

Brun, unmoving, cross-legged on the ground. A single beam of sunlight shining straight down the well of grass found her there so that, surrounded by buttercups, she seemed to be sitting in a puddle of gold. Only her fingers moved remorselessly, like robot arms in a factory, plucking buttercup after buttercup, draining gold from the world for her daisy chain, plucking piercing, threading, stitching.

Her eyes, fixed, and blue light like icefire deep within.

A cold wind blew through him.

Kites scratched colour from the sky.

Dragonflies hung in a quivering circle around them.

From the deep currents within the long grass, the sound of armies clashing.

Chewing on his lower lip, Chad tried to think. Something's coming. Out of the grass. Something big. Then, that's impossible. It's only a few inches high. A foot, no more. Certainly no higher than my knee. Nothing human could hide there. No armies, no wolves, no ice giants.

He sucked in air that tasted as grey as the wounds in the sky. No, wait. I have to believe my own senses. I've seen impossible things. I've seen a grey man bleed colour, seen a gas flame freeze solid. And worse. Much

worse. I've seen a hand come out of a hole in the world to grasp and hold and never let go. Nothing human can be hiding in the grass. But - what if it's not human?

'Brun!'

She sat in lotus, tor in a lake of gold, fingers a blur, weaving buttercups, a skein of darker gold.

Chad, moving towards her, felt something odd, as if the ground wasn't where it should be. He took another step, and another. Again he felt the curious sensation underfoot, as if the ground wasn't where it should be when his foot touched it. He thought, crazy! I'm only three steps away from her. I was sitting right by her!

But no matter how far he walked, no matter how many steps he took, Brun remained stubbornly distant.

Like looking through the wrong end of a telescope.

'Brun, get up! Come over here.'

The girl, motionless, weaving.

'Something weird's going on. We have to go! Now!'

Fingers a blur; plucking, piercing, threading.

'Dad! Hjelle Miyake!'

Overhead, kites scraped colour from the sky, arcing closer, the wind in their strings humming, screeching. The older wounds continued to darken, and Chad thought he saw lights there. Stars? Were the kites scraping away the sky? Eating the sun? Or was it more than that?

Were they somehow eating time itself?

'Brun – have to – go – now-'

Chad, moaning, willed his legs to move. Fists clenched he beat them, left, right, left. There was no pain. As if sensation itself was draining away with the colour in the sky.

'Come – on – come on!'

Then somehow he was running.

Running. Without. Moving.

‘Brun!’

She was still, only her fingers blurred, like a trick photograph. Threading, stitching, weaving.

Buttercups, a golden chain.

‘Dad! Hjelle Miyake! DAD!’

Chad threw himself forward. Maybe he could fall on her, break the spell somehow. Anything-

Something slapped against his face. A spider web? He brushed it away. His hand tangled.

Not a web.

Kite string.

And now they fell upon him, swooping and shrieking, strings humming, wires in a wind, cloth catching the sky, snapping and barking like dogs or wolves.

‘Brun – what – no!’

Chad, arms outstretched, thrashed madly. The kites were everywhere, jagged arcs scraping colour from the day, the wounds deepening, bleeding shadows and starlight.

Chad, fighting, felt the strings tighten. His arms were wrenched to odd angles, his body held painfully rigid. Still the strings tightened. Arms and legs grew numb as blood slowed.

‘Brun-’

She sat, weaving gold.

Strings cut into his face, lacerating a cheek, closing one eye. His hands and feet were gone, blood tide stilled.

He tried to shout. String clamped his jaw.

Kites shrieking, open mouths to swallow the day.

A last burst of frantic energy and they were still, their string used up. One final arc, a protesting flap and they were dead things lying on the ground. But the world was grey now, wounds persisting to black, all colour gone and only the stars to mourn.

And Brun, blurred hands and buttercup crown in a puddle of golden sunlight, burning more brightly than ever, the last colour in all the world.

Moments passed

Chad, spider-wrapped, breath gone and straining.

Roger and Hjelle Miyake stepped into view. They moved slowly, deliberately. In clenched fists each held kite handles, string trailing. Fists uncurled. The handles dropped unnoticed from their fingers onto the ground. They looked at Brun, unseeing, hands blurred, still weaving gold. They stopped at the very edge of the puddle of sunlight, as if afraid to go in.

Chad struggled, wanted to scream and kick. Kite string held him fast. Pins and needles crept from his feet and hands into his legs and arms.

And then as he watched, the world a flattened picture through one open eye, Chad saw Brun stop weaving. Her hands grew still. The buttercup skein was finished.

Roger and Hjelle Miyake stepped forward in unison. Roger took the golden skein from Brun's hands. Hjelle Miyake unclasped the amber necklace from around her neck. Roger placed the buttercup chain there instead. Like for like. Buttercups for amber tears. They moved away, and as they stepped out of the sunlight, it faded.

The world was grey.

Chad, motionless, raged impotently.

Pins and needles crept slowly along his limbs and into his chest.

Now the grass parted. No, not that. It was as if the shadow currents seeping out from between the long blades gradually ran together, merging quickly like ice on a freezing pond. A shape formed there, solid, three dimensional. A man. Gary, the Letting Agent.

The Grey Man.

He took the amber necklace from Hjelle Miyake.

Now the dragonflies moved, and there were many more than eighteen. Swarms of them, arcing from the grass, bodies like a darkly shimmering fog that coalesced around Roger and Hjelle Miyake.

‘mm – mmmm!’

The fog dispersed.

His parents were gone.

Only the Grey Man remained.

Chad flinched as he moved closer.

His head tilted, a thoughtful examination.

There was a scar on his cheek, curved like the edge of a fingernail. All the colour left in the world was in that bitter seam.

The Grey Man smiled. His lips were a second scar.

Turning, he melted back into the grass.

Chad remained, a boy wrenched into tree-shapes by unyielding kite string; his sister, cross-legged and motionless upon the grass, hands held rigidly before her as if cupping a necklace or a crown.

Chad, raging, held that way for what seemed like hours as, slowly, the wounds in the day healed and colour bled back into the world.

With colour came feeling. First pins and needles, then a sharp burning sensation. Chad yelled in pain. Kite string fell from his face. He struggled free of the nylon cocoon, crashed to the ground, legs like rubber, pounding the feeling back into his hands and feet.

‘eeeh – aah – aah – ooh – ah – are – you – OK?’

Chad, crawling across the bumpy ground to his sister, struck suddenly by how short the grass was, how warm the sunlight. He found himself squinting. The colours were too bright. It took his eyes long moments to adjust. He felt grimy, sweaty, as if he hadn’t bathed for a week. As if his

skin was covered in dust, old cobwebs.

‘Brun!’ She was motionless, all colour gone. A girl made of shadows. She slept.

He shook her but she did not stir.

‘She will not wake. Do not think to disturb her. You will not like what you may wake from its long sleep.’ The voice, warm yet laced with threat, a bright surface over hidden depths like a river swollen to bursting with meltwater.

Chad, turning, confronted a tall figure dressed in brown. A woman, face creased, somehow familiar, like a favourite book. Her hair, still thick, an inky shadow dusted with winter. Her eyes dark, yet shot through with streaks of light. He thought, like a time lapse photograph of stars.

‘Your sister was bound to this place by a chain of gold. The chain is gone but the shadow of it remains. The deep currents are in her now. Or maybe it would be better to say, she is in them.’

‘Who-?’ Chad, his voice a rusty squeak.

‘Margaret C. You got my note.’

‘About the pipes icing up?’

‘And other things.’

‘It just said about ice.’

‘You must learn to look beneath the surface.’

Chad, frowning. ‘And they still sell those groovy little X-Ray Spex in the high street novelty shop do they?’

‘Do not make light of this! Arrogance has been the downfall of many a man.’

‘Just as well I’m only a kid then.’

A moment grew between them.

The wind, blustering, gathered strength.

‘I could talk of death, of destiny. The delights of gods and the evil of

love.’ Her voice, harsh, but with a sudden unexpected warmth.

‘Though I think tea will be more effective. Camomile with honey, to settle the disposition. Tell me, boy. Do you like biscuits?’

The words, snapped, caught Chad off guard.

‘I... er... I suppose.’

‘Of course you do, of course you do. All boys like biscuits. Well then. Help me lift your sister. You will find she is lighter than you think. First we sup, then we plan. Come along!’

Chapter 15

Lifting his sister on to the farmhouse bed, Chad was struck by how little she seemed to weigh. As if he wasn't so much supporting her against the force of gravity as preventing her from floating off like an untethered balloon.

'Why is she so light?' His voice, concerned; the question jabbing, testing, a fighter feeling out his opponent.

'How much does a shadow weigh?'

Chad, frowning. 'That's nonsense.'

'Is it?' Mrs C, folding down the coverlet. 'No. Don't take her shoes off. Keep all her clothes on. She'll need an anchor.'

'Anchor? What are you on about? Her clothes are filthy.'

Mrs C slipped Brun beneath the covers and pulled them up to her chin. 'Blankets. In the cupboard behind you.'

'It's the middle of summer? She'll fry!'

'Is it? Will she?' Her voice, soft as she took the heavy woollen blankets. 'Thank you.' Then, sharply. 'No, don't pull the curtains! The room will need to be kept as light as possible.'

'How will she rest?'

'Rest? Don't flaunt your ignorance, boy! Instead use your senses. Your sister is already more than half way gone from this world.'

'You're mad.' His voice, slow, full of dreamy terror.

'Every last caterwauling one of us.' She smiled, a sudden warmth. 'If

we've any sense, that is. Very well. We've done all we can do here, at least for the moment. Come downstairs to the kitchen. I'll make tea.'

Following Mrs C along the passage and down the narrow attic stairs, Chad was struck by how similar her home was to the farm his father had rented for summer. How similar, and yet how different.

Located a mile and a half further along the same road leading out of town, both farm houses were of a similar period and basic construction. But where their building had the neutral, freshly decorated but shallow feel of a holiday rental accommodation, Mrs C's home felt deeply and thoroughly occupied. There was a weight here, of personal possessions, of history, of time. The passages were made narrower by stools piled high with magazines, wobbling shelves full of books, endless stacks of cardboard boxes that might have been children's games, their titles obscured by other boxes, or more books, or simply faded by what must be years of exposure to sunlight. And there was a lot of that here. Every passage was pierced through and through with windows. Tiny openings punched in the thick farmhouse walls, each fitted with lumpy, leaded glass, the deep sills loaded with dusty ornaments, tiny statues, matchboxes, old fashioned tobacco tins. One rattled as if full of screws or nails when he ventured to pick it up and shake it. At first he thought the window glass was coloured like the stained glass in a church window. He shivered at the thought of a hand reaching out of a hole in the world to clutch and hold and never let go. But then he realised the glass was clear. All the colour came from outside, from the world beyond the solid, lumpy walls. The light fell in shafts through the house, dispersing the shadows easily. Every room had a rough wooden door and every door was dressed; loaded coat-hangers weighed down with any number of trousers, dresses, coats, pullovers, shirts, gloves, scarves or hats hung from hooks or handles, or were jammed in the space between the top of the door and the frame. The walls held cupboards, thick wooden doors painted a cheerful yellow or white or lime green. Chad found himself wondering what was in those cupboards? Bedding? More knick-knacks? Even more clothing? The space between each cupboard or stool or shelf was filled with bronze: horse brasses on leather straps, tiny commemorative plates with ship designs, tiny, seamlessly cast biplanes or motor cars or animals on little wooden stands. Rough wooden frames filled with watercolour landscapes or sets of tea-cards leaned haphazardly into every space and corner and, sunlit, felt like yet more windows, opening onto an infinity of other times and places.

The house was a junk collector's wonderland yet it felt clean and warm, like fresh laundry; ironing and pot-pourri and a kitchen stove that smelled of outdoors and pine-scented woodchips.

And tea made with herbs.

And oven-warm biscuits.

With a start Chad realised he was hungry. The irony of spending a morning lugging around a picnic from which he'd eaten not so much as a peach was suddenly painted in very sharp relief.

The centrepiece of the farmhouse kitchen was a thick, lumpy wooden table. Eighteen brightly polished blowlamps hung from the ceiling above it. Daylight from the leaded window sprayed off the lamps, a waterfall of golden sparks.

'It's like waves.' Chad, bemused, ran a finger lightly across the undulating table top. 'How do you eat off it?'

'Carefully.' Her reply, short, amused.

'It reminds me of something...'

'The sea.'

'What kind of wood is it?'

'Oak.'

'Viking ships were made of oak... '

'You will find many things in this town, many old things anyway, are made in part or whole from something else.' Her voice, summer tide in a winter sea. 'Tea. The cupboard beside the sink. The black tin.'

Chad, exploring the pungent depths of the cupboard, grasped a heavy tin and handed it over.

'Like the timbers in the town library.'

'Quite.'

He thought, recursion. Reiteration. Like a crown upon the Crown.

He said, 'My father told us-'

‘I know very well what your father told you.’

Her voice, sharp again.

He thought, being with her is like being at sea. You never know what’s under the surface.

He said, ‘Were you there the whole time? Why didn’t I see you?’

She smiled. Took the top off the tin, shook some tea into a cast iron pot. Setting the pot upon the range, she reached around behind the fridge and produced a milk bottle full of water. Chad felt his lips curl admiringly. ‘The heat exchangers still work. Clever.’

‘It’s enough to keep the water from freezing at any rate.’ Smiling modestly, she plucked a blowlamp from its ceiling fixture and shook it. Oil sloshed inside. Using matches she lit the lamp and placed it next to the teapot on the range, so its flame would boil the water.

‘Why did you leave us a note then? If you had water, I mean?’

‘Think of it as my way of breaking the ice.’

‘Ha ha. If you were there all the time, on the Crown I mean, why did you let my parents take Brun’s necklace?’

A moment hung between them. The blowlamp chugged and whooshed. The steamy herbal aroma of tea seeped out from the pot into the kitchen. Chad closed his eyes for a second.

‘Biscuit?’

When he looked she was on the other side of the kitchen, another cupboard, another black tin. She took the lid off and put the tin on the table. It didn’t wobble.

‘Help yourself.’

He thought, biscuits. That’s a no-brainer.

‘Thanks.’ Reaching into the tin, ‘What really happened up there anyway? On the Crown I mean.’

Mrs C, setting a steaming mug on the table before him, said, ‘The forces surrounding you are polarising.’

Chad, sipping, felt her words ebb and flow around him, echoes of another voice.

Forces are polarising Chad.

Ellyn's words, her voice ice, hard and beautiful, threaded with the overwhelming scent of apple blossom.

The starfire I saw, the burning people. It's you they burn for, you they want. They're in love with you, Chad. They want you back.

A hand in a church, reaching out from a hole in the world to grasp and hold and never let go. The hand of the Ice Man in the museum. Blood-gloved and dragon-ringed. Chad, rubbing his own finger where even now the impression of a ring he had never worn stood out in sharp relief, the flesh white and itchy-cold.

They want you back. They put the end of the world in a music box. When you played the disk you let it out.

Chad, shaking his head to clear the tide of memory.

'You know my dad's brought us on holiday here off and on ever since I was eight. Nobody's ever kidnapped him before. For that matter nobody's ever scratched all the colour out of the sky or paralysed me with kite string, or attacked me in a ruined church.'

Cramming biscuit.

'Or made a music box play without disks or made me think I was a fighter in a war where the moon and the sun were eaten by a giant wolf and the earth was destroyed by giants made of rock and ice!'

Gulping tea.

'That's hot.'

'It came from a hot place, dear.'

'Are you deliberately being obtuse or is there a reason you're avoiding answering my questions?'

She shrugged. 'I told you the table was made of oak.'

'You know what I mean!'

A moment hung there, shimmering with tension. For a beat Chad thought he heard a heartbreaking melody, like distant bells or melting ice. Then nothing. Just the chuffing blowlamp and the teapot, toil and trouble and too much of both.

Then, 'Yes. I was there. I watched everything. I let your parents take your sister's necklace.'

'Why!' The question burst from him with explosive force.

'The necklace she wore is old beyond knowing. It is a link to forces gathering around us. It is incredibly dangerous.'

'So why did-'

Her voice, obsidian, cut him off. 'It's bad that your parents took the necklace. It's bad they gave it to the Grey Man. They must be very far gone that they would favour his desires above the needs of their own child.'

Chad, shivering, said nothing.

'It is bad that the Grey Man has the necklace. But how much worse would it be if your sister still wore it? Love is dangerous, Chad. And the necklace is so very lovely... no. Brun would never have given it up. Never have released herself from its grip. Even an adult would have been hard pressed to surrender that trinket. And she is but a child. No, it would have destroyed her. By letting your parents take it I may have helped save your sister's life.'

A moment.

'And then again, maybe your parents realised that truth also. Maybe there was a single shred of humanity left in them at the end.'

'But what does it mean?'

Chad, breathless.

'Why does the Grey Man want the necklace? What's its power? Why is Brun asleep like this? Why is she all grey like that? Why won't she wake up?'

'Answers. I understand you want them – need them. To one like you questions are an addiction, answers the only balm. But a temporary one at

best! Listen now for I am going to tell you something very important. There are no lessons learned so effectively as those we learn for ourselves. I could give you answers, true, but they would be shallow, a drop of water to slake a raging thirst.'

'You sound like my dad!'

'Shut up boy!'

A shocked moment.

'I see you aren't entirely beyond reaching yet. Good. Finish your tea. Finish your biscuit. You will need the strength those herbs offer before the day is done.'

Chad, swallowing.

'Why did you say may have? Why did you say, ' "May have helped save her life?" '

'Why do you suppose you were restrained, prevented from reaching or helping your sister?'

'I don't know!'

'Then think!'

'Because... because...' Chad, frowning, felt a cold tide of realisation crash over him. 'Because I was the one they thought might be able to do something.' The tide, dragging him along in its wake. 'All those people on the crown, the picnickers, the kite flyers... those people weren't important. I was the one they thought was dangerous.'

'Or perhaps by preventing you from acting, they were saving your life. Perhaps that single shred of humanity left in them knew that you would be needed later if your sister were to live.'

Chad, groaning. 'Look, this is all just too weird. I don't get it! Why us? Why now? It's driving me mad! People with no colour. People turning into dragonflies. The whole world's going base over apex faster than you can say Jack Robinson!'

'Maybe it's a way to keep you off your guard, off your best game.'

'Best game?!' His voice, cold now. 'This is Brun's life we're talking

about! Not to mention Dad and Hjelle Miyake!'

'Well then stop fussing and listen!'

Her voice, hard and sharp as ice, spiked the room.

A moment.

Chad, sipping, considered.

'Oh go on then. I don't see how things can get any worse!'

'You mentioned dragonflies. In myth dragonflies are associated with the goddess Freya.'

'Ah! More avoidance-'

'Brunhilde - was another name for Freya.'

'My sister's name isn't Brunhilde, it's just-

'A contraction!'

Her voice, a whipcrack.

'Did you ever ask your mother what it was short for?'

'My mother's dead.'

'Ninety four percent of people who've ever lived are dead.'

Her words, cold.

'For God's sake!'

'I know how death feels.'

Her voice, no warmer for the sympathy.

'You asked a question. Now heed my answer! Or put down your weapons and surrender to your fate.'

A moment hung between them.

Glacial silence, still and cold.

'Do you want your sister to live?'

‘Of course I do!’

‘The buttercups are keeping her here-’

‘What?!”

‘Heaven give me strength, will you listen boy! In this universe light has weight. Flowers absorb sunlight. Your sister needs an anchor. If not for the buttercups then she would be gone to the shadows already. Dust and cobwebs in the shape of a girl. A nothing wrapped in skin and hair. But flowers wither once picked. In time the buttercups will fade, and your sister with them. Do you understand?’

‘You know I don’t!’

‘Then listen to one who does!’

‘I suppose-’

Her head, shaking.

‘How they raise their whelps these days.’

‘I’m not a-’

‘Precocious child! Your arrogance will be the unmaking of her!’

‘Right. I’ve had enough of this. I’m leaving. Do you have a telephone? I’m going to call the police. Get an ambulance for Brun. And the looney-van for you!’

‘Fool!’

‘Do you have a telephone!’

‘In the hallway.’

He moved quickly before she could change her mind. But the steady tone of an open line was gone, replaced by music, a heartbreaking melody, like distant bells or melting ice, the notes cloaked in white noise like a distant shriek, an army of voices screaming in a language he nearly understood.

Ramming the handset back onto its cradle, he marched back into the kitchen.

‘We’re leaving.’

‘Sit down! I have shown patience enough with you!’

He stood, shaking, furious. He thought, the old bat is two geese short of a gaggle. I have to get Brun out of here.

‘I’ll tell you of dragonflies. There are those who call them The Devil’s Darning Needles. They say these creatures can stitch together the lips of lying children. Think on this: there were dragonflies when she fell asleep. Now there are none. And she cannot speak.’

‘She can’t speak because she’s asleep!’

‘No voice. No words. No stories. Your sister is dying.’

‘You’re talking rot!’

Her face a stone.

‘Utter rot!’

A standoff.

‘Alright. Alright! So she can’t speak. She can’t wake, she’s fading to shadows and all of that. I think you’re splitting hairs but what the heck. So these dragonflies, these Devil’s Darning Needles, they took her voice, so what? How do we get it back?’

His voice, a gathering storm.

‘How do we get Brun back!’

A moment hung between them, sun-bright and biscuit scented.

‘You must leave this place. Catch the dragonfly which stole her voice.’

‘Oh well of course, that’s easy enough. There are only a few hundred of them and they can only fly at thirty miles per hour!’

Mrs C, waiting, said nothing.

His voice, shaking. ‘And what if I do catch one? Then what?’

‘A better question. Your captive will demand its freedom. Then you can bargain for what it has stolen.’

‘How will I find them? How will I know which one to chase? How will I catch it?’

Questions he reeled off automatically. Avoidance, he knew it.

What had Brun been lying about?

‘All fiction is lies, boy.’

A statement as ambiguous as the woman herself. But Chad was already past the answer. The only question that meant anything hammered with the blood that rushed through his heart and head.

‘ “In this universe light has weight.” That’s what you said. “In this universe.” ’

Nova-bright, the question consumed him.

‘What other universe is there?’

Chapter 16

In the wake of the question, the sun reached its zenith, toppled past into afternoon. Lengthening shadows folded slowly about the house.

The kitchen grew dim, the gloom dispelled by four blowlamps placed by Mrs C on the gas hob. Blue flame flickered there and shadows danced at the tips of the flames. The warmth should have been a comfort but the blue flames just made Chad think of ice; a ring of blue ice like a stone circle, and each thick-hewn berg with the shadow of a giant folded into its cold heart. A cold that snatched at him like a hand reaching out from a hole in the world to clutch and hold and never let go.

Elbows planted firmly either side of a thick china plate loaded with sausage and mash, face adrift on a cloud of onion-scented steam, Chad strained his ears for any sound from above. Twice in the last hour he had ventured aloft, following Mrs C as she had checked on his sister. Brun slept deeply, changeless, or else if there was movement it was the slow roll of timeless hills, waves upon history's tide. On the second visit Chad was startled to see her lips were parted, as if she were trying to form words, to talk in her sleep. He bent close but could detect no sound, not even a whisper of breath. He had but a moment to listen before he was tugged away.

Colour continued to drain from her, minutely.

On each visit Mrs C brought more lights. Table lamps, bedside lamps, lamps on stands, lamps with old fashioned shades made of coloured glass or textured paper. Now Brun rested in a ring of light, the glow pure and antiseptic, yet still it seemed there was not enough substance in her to cast a shadow upon the bed covers.

Chad, shivering, immersed in onion steam and fear for his sister, toyed

with his food. He was sick with hunger but too afraid to eat.

And slowly the question consuming him became not why should I go - but when.

Sensing the change, Mrs C waited until Chad finished his meal before ushering him impatiently from the house, bolting and padlocking the back door behind them as if to prevent him coming back inside.

Chad, drowsy from the warmth and food, stood bolt upright on the path, rubbing his arms in the cool of early evening.

Like her house, Mrs C's garden was different from that of the farmhouse his parents had rented. Where Applegate nestled among a fragrant orchard here there was only a long vegetable garden, sticks and glass panels like scattered diamonds clothed in brown and green, the whole ripening through slow summer.

Chad, curious, stepped among a legion of stick men with rattling cans for feet and hands and footballs or old ballcocks for heads. Torch reflector eyes followed him wherever he moved, bright as the sun.

'Why so many scarecrows?'

'Foxes. Notorious thieves and tricksters the lot of them. They live in the shadows, drawn to open doors and empty hearts. Your sister would be the richest dregs for them. It would not take many foxes to carry her away, I think, and finish the job the dragonflies began. Then where would we be?'

Chad, suddenly tongue-tied, thought, when she speaks it's like I'm drowning and the words are dragging me under.

'That'll be the shock.'

Her voice, responding again to words unvoiced.

'Dangerous thing, shock. It dulls our instincts, our voice and mind. Puts us in a fog. We can't see or think and all that we know is just ourselves reflected back to us in the grey.'

Her finger, flicking one of the scarecrows. A can, spinning, rattled alarmingly.

'Sometimes it takes something dangerous to cut through that fog. A

lightning strike to light the way, burn off the grey and leave everything clear again. But you have to be quick because it's so fast. Hesitate and your chance is gone. You have to catch the lightning when it comes boy, and hold on, and ride it!'

Her fingers, gripping the can. Sudden silence.

'We're not talking about a day-rover ticket on a double-decker you know!' His words snapped out like a whip. 'On this planet lightning can drill holes thirty yards into the ground and fuse rock into glass. Grab that and ride it!'

She chuckled, her voice the trickle of rock that comes before a fall.

'Don't they teach you anything useful at school these days?'

Chad, scowling. 'Pick a less threatening metaphor next time. You might get better results.'

'Good!' Now she was flint, a dagger and her voice the sharpest stroke. 'There's that fighting spirit at last. Not much of a strike, mind, but it'll come, oh it'll come, I assure you, with focus and application. And then, Chad, named for the field of battle, you'll be right-named indeed. And right-measured too, I shouldn't wonder.'

Her head cocked suddenly sideways for a closer inspection from which he flinched involuntarily.

'Anyway, I wasn't being metaphorical.'

Chad, drawing blood from his lower lip, thought, steady on old son. She might be a nutter but Brun's in her bedroom.

A moment hung between them.

The woman broke it. 'I am not mad, boy. There are things I cannot remember and others I never knew but I am not mad!'

Chad, lips twisted, a grim smile. Score one for me then.

'I hope the score will be higher before the day is done.'

'How did you-' Chad, lips thinning, bit his tongue.

She said, 'The time has come for armour and weapons. Follow me!'

The greenhouse was a short walk from the house, glass walls scummed and running with moisture, wooden frames flaking pungently. A key released a time-tarnished padlock and the woman ushered him inside.

Walking into the greenhouse was like walking into the jungle. Here the world was green folded in endless aromatic green, a simple lawn mutated by a child's magnifying glass, branch and leaf and twig and bole, striated and fibrous, quivering with life. The sun slid around in the sky and Chad blinked in the sudden riot. Yellow, orange, amber, rose, cream, blue; purple, violet. Petal and stamen. Flame and stars. Endless summer gathered here under a few yards of scummed glass. A new world and for a heartbeat he was Columbus, breathing in time with the jungle. Then he took a step and felt planks beneath his feet, the steamy breath of plants on his cheek, and the spell was broken.

Not broken, merely transformed, as each step took him further away from the world he knew, deeper into the green.

'You'll be walking in a different place.' Mrs C slipped along a crated aisle, crooked fingers walking peeling wooden frames, darting here and there, plucking stem and root, shaking free loose earth or mulch, folding her selection into a broad green leaf and packing it tight.

'You'll need to become one with that world. Or it will become one with you, and you will cease to exist. Even armoured the road will be hard. Here!' Thrusting the packet of vegetable matter into his hand. 'Swallow this!' she added, forestalling the leading question.

Chad, taking the leafy packet, weighed it thoughtfully.

'It's heavy. What's in it?'

'Courage! Speed! Conviction! Terror! Truth!'

Her voice, a whipcrack, branches snapping in high wind.

'Now eat! And mind you chew it well. You would not want the indigestion this recipe would give you.'

Chad, frowning, turned the packet over and over.

He rubbed the leaf thoughtfully between fingertips.

The packet, waxy with resin, grainy with pollen, shreds of dirt clinging

to the green, the whole wreathed in a heady mix of scents, sat hard in his palm like a heavy rock.

'Do not hesitate!' Her arm, a dial pointing near-level and to the west, the shadow of her fingers inking her face.

'Look at the sun! The day is almost gone. Do you not trust me by now?'

He thought, trust you? Fat chance!

'Then do it for your sister.'

Once again her voice answered unspoken words.

Impatient, she turned her back, moved away into the jungle.

Chad, eyes narrowed, watched her fingers caress a leafy stem and thought he heard her murmur consolingly.

He looked up then, through the canopy to the distant sun, lonely and hot in a sky mirror-cracked with branches. He gritted his teeth. What choice did he really have? He was powerless here, as he always seemed to be, driven by the currents of other people's lives – or lies. His time would come. Patience. That was the trick. Everything comes to he who waits.

'Where are you boy!' Her voice, snapping out of the green. 'There's a time for learning to control your anger and this is not it!'

'I'm coming!'

'Yes and so's Christmas!' Her voice, abrasive, seeping dangerous humour. 'Though at this rate we shall see it a far stride sooner than its time, I'll venture!'

A second door released Chad from the greenhouse and the afternoon, in reality still warm, struck his face like a cool kiss.

He stood beside a high, hedge-like border of rhododendron and other rambling growth. The vegetable garden and the farmhouse lay out of sight. The hedge stretched either way until it was obscured by young trees, broken only by a wooden frame in which stood the green scummed glass panelled door he had just walked through.

Twenty yards away the ground sloped gently down to the bank of a stream. Sun sparks flashed on the water. Buttercups and bluebells erupted

in clumps from long grass. On the far side of the stream old trees climbed right down to the water to drink. The bank there was a child's mess of roots and dark hollows.

Now more than ever he was aware of the scent of apple blossom, drifting in on a cool breeze, threading the trees and wild spaces with a pure melody like distant bells or melting ice.

The leafy packet was heavy, a hard nut in his fist.

Chad, hesitating, cast a look back over his shoulder at the now-inviting warmth of the greenhouse.

'Oh yes.' Mrs C, her nearness making him jump. 'Summer still reigns in there. Winter will be a long time coming between those walls. But do not think it a refuge. No garden is ever as tame as you might suppose, not even with all the potions and pruners the factories of this world have bred. There are always weeds.' Her voice, a dark breath, oak scented, penetrating. 'Sometimes the weeds are what you want. And then you have to let the wild in. And that's when you have to be careful.'

Her gaze, like daggers. 'Now eat my little packet boy. It's time to let the wild in.'

Chad, frowning, rubbed his chin. 'If I do this what guarantee do I-'

Her voice, the crack of broken wood. 'Should I feed you, like your mother? Should I have you on my knee, bouncing and breast fed? I think not! The seed has fallen and now must grow. Chew! Swallow! Arm yourself! Then run. Run like the wind and bring back your sister's thief.'

Chad, glancing up, felt the westing sun spike him, butterfly to a pin. He felt a mad wind blow through him. A force without reckoning. He felt like his sister's creation, Freya, the girl pictured in the music box, her back to the cliff, her face to the future, poised on the brink of choosing a man she loved to die.

The world flashed inside out like an X-ray. For a heartbeat stars held sway in a sky scraped of all colour by kites that snapped and whined like wolves. And a hand, blood-gloved and dragon-ringed, reached out of a hole in the world, to grab and hold and never let go.

But something was different now and Chad knew it. Like the girl in the

music box he stood on the verge of something. Good or bad he couldn't say but the choice to take this road was his. He felt empowered. And the wind that blew through him rocked him on the balls of his feet. His nostrils flared. Pupils wide, he stared into the sun, suddenly unafraid.

He put the leafy packet into his mouth, chewed carefully and swallowed.

'Yessss!'

Mrs C, her voice a wind to stir the darkest forest, insistent, triumphant.

He waited.

As he waited it seemed to him several things began to happen at the same time.

First of all the space he was in seemed to widen. Unmoving, true, yet still the trees seemed further apart, their canopies higher, their shape somehow more profound. Their branches seemed to arch together, cathedral-like, almost gothic, roofing hollows of darkness where thin shafts of yellow sunlight fell through fog-drifts of pollen, brilliant pinpoints in the gloom.

Secondly the sounds he could hear took on a deeper resonance. Wind thrust with arrogant satisfaction. Bark and bole creaked and rumbled. Stream-trickle became river-roar, underpinned by a deep vibration, a waterfall perhaps, or far distant sea.

At the same time Chad's awareness of himself began to change, or rather become more acute. He felt the rough scrape of clothes against his skin, the hooked cling of pollen adrift on the air, sticking to his tongue as he breathed. The air in his throat was a curtain of ice. The same wind that moved the trees moved across his skin. Every hair on his arm and neck swayed in resonance, a mirror to the trees around him. He began to dissociate from himself, able to see himself as a separate entity existing within his own body but separate from it. Yet at the same time he felt connected to everything.

He thought, if I close my eyes I'll be able to see the inside of myself.

The idea made him laugh, and the sensation was like bubbles bursting in his belly.

Motionless, he seemed to embody a universe of potential energy.

Anything was possible. He had only to take a step. A single step, not even that. Just to move his fingers, to feel the scrape and bump of fingerprints as he rubbed his fingertips together. Even that slight movement would set up a resonance in the air, the trees, the water, creating change. A change he knew he could direct.

Something slammed in his chest.

Bang!

Chad jumped. His heart! His heart had just beat, a hammer in his chest, and him the anvil.

Bang-bang!

The rhythm drove outwards and inwards, churning, relentless.

BANG-bang! BANG-bang!

Blood coursed, rich tide, through skin and muscle.

His fingers moved, the tiniest action. Air swirled. Pollen flipped and folded in the new currents. A butterfly crashed past, wings hammering the sky. The air coursing across its back gusted and howled. Pollen swirled in its wake.

Chad, lifting a finger, drew lazy loops in the air around the fluttering dart. Three – four – half a dozen per wing beat.

I'm moving faster than a butterfly can flap its wings.

He traced the concept from a noiseless synaptic spark, through the crackle of electrical impulses running his nervous system, to the harsh physicality of words erupting from his cavernous mouth, smashing into the air with the force of hammers.

The butterfly, bounced by the sudden gale of his voice, flipped away in a spiral, out of control.

His heartbeat, an increasing rhythm.

The scent of apple blossom, growing now, with a melody like cathedral bells or the thunder-crack of a calving glacier.

'WHAT'S-'

‘GOING-’

‘ONNN-’

His voice, grinding rock.

A sound like an earthquake.

Mrs C laughing.

‘They’re coming, can you hear them?’

The sound of broken machinery humming far off across distant hills.

Not machinery.

And not distant. Not any more.

They came from upriver, a trio of sun-bright shapes balanced on wings of fire. Glittering darts with star clusters for eyes and streaks of sunlight for wings, they tore through the air and butterflies tumbled, a helpless train in their wake.

Chad, rigid, caught in a sudden fog of butterflies.

Three darts, glittering, hovered in front of his face.

‘Hey!’

He clutched, arm swing and finger bend crane-clumsy.

They avoided him easily, jagging left and right, up and down, lightning stitches and him the cloth.

‘Hey!’

And they were gone, leaving only glowing spots, his eyes dazzled from the glare.

It was time.

Chad moved.

The world blurred.

Hedge, door, greenhouse, farmhouse, all gone.

Mrs C, gone.

Brun, gone.

Chad.

Gone.

He moved, leaning into the chase, and the world collapsed in his wake, pollen, butterflies, flowers, trees, water, earth and sky and sun caught in his slipstream, tumbling.

The dragonflies, opal-lightning, jagged across the water.

He ran, lunged, hands arrowing through air like soup.

Fingertips brushed wings like gossamer flame.

'Got you - oh!'

A touch, silver-warm, for a single heartbeat - then nothing.

Three darts of prismatic fire, streaks of light all mad angles stitching him to the world, then off on a line upstream.

He ran.

Behind him a sound like thunder. Mrs C, shouting something. The words were lost, a hollow crack, lightning split trees, nothing more. They couldn't keep up.

He ran.

Past tree trunks made umber clouds.

Through fields of grass and rape and corn that flickered like old film.

Faster than her voice.

Faster than the wind.

Faster than the sun.

With a soft concussion the world went silent. No sound could keep up with him now.

Sunlight hung around him like a curtain of beads. Particles. Photons.

Mathematical quanta. Motionless.

He pushed through, scattering sun-beads.

The world stretched, colours red-shifted as it fell behind.

Ahead, three darts of silver-blue lightning, jagged streaks of ice in a world turned to embers.

Molecules, atoms, electrons, neutrons.

Walls on which the universe was built.

Quantum foam.

The foundation of matter and energy.

Time, a frozen river.

Chad, chasing the lightning, vaulted moments and hours like farmyard fences, split the world and tore through the gap.

The blue-silver darts seemed closer now.

He stretched out an arm, deepening blue, the hand indigo, near invisible. Lightning flashed at his fingertips.

Shadow-ghosts blurred past on each side, violet burning to red. Roads, houses, shops, trees, hills, mountains, clouds.

A wind blew through him, or was that the world, reduced by sheer speed to particles and foam, passing through him as if he and it were no more solid than mist?

Something touched his fingers!

He clutched and the lightning jagged.

‘Up and left! Come on arm! Concentrate! That’s it!’

Another touch!

Another!

‘Yes! That’s it! That’s it! Don’t let it get- no!’

The lightning forked, three separate tracks of dazzling blue-silver. Chad,

confused, overreached, stumbled. The world screamed around him, slow enough to hear, then with a soft wham! back to silence as he drove on, faster, faster.

The-

I'm running faster than the world can turn. Faster than the stars through space. So fast I'm not here anymore.

-lightning-

Chad, joyscream in a blue-red world, folding, unfolding.

-jagged-

Origami boy, dimensionless.

The lightning jagged, arcs and moments-

Chad refolded himself. A new shape. Faster.

The lightning jagged, arcs and moments, desperate to flee-

Chad felt pain thread his body.

Closer.

Legs convulsing, arms stitched with cramp.

Closer.

He was never meant to be this shape-

The lightning jagged, arcs and moments, desperate to flee, unable to escape.

Closer.

Forget about the pain. Just for a second. Just a second. Wait for it. Wait for it – now! Jump! JUMP!

He leaped and the world, red-shifted, fell away.

All pressure gone.

He was light.

Fingers, near invisible, closed tight.

A thin screech, angry, like broken machinery, running up his arm like static electricity.

His teeth buzzed.

Copper on his tongue.

Almost he let go.

Almost.

Chad, freight train and the tracks all gone, smashed through bushes and trees and rocks. He screamed, his voice fire, and the world screamed with him.

Umber clouds blurred to tree trunks.

Stuttering frames of film became fields: corn, rape, grass.

Red-shifted ghosts slowed to hills, rocks, trees, bushes.

Grass.

Bluebells.

Buttercups.

His voice, the tunnel-roar of a waterfall.

'HOLY COW-'

Curtains of photons became beams of sunlight in vaulted green, spraying madly as he caromed through them, slower, slower.

Clockspring universe, winding down around him.

Night. No clouds or moon. Electric stars.

'Got you!'

Silver lightning flashed in his fist.

Fingers, numb from clenching, uncurled.

'Got you-'

Frozen starlight, sharp-edged in his palm.

Not a dragonfly.

A key.

Chapter 17

Chad breathed.

His first full breath in - how long?

Air slid into his lungs and night came with it, softly insistent. He waited for the cough, the raw throat, the hundred other aches and pains he knew must run wild through his body.

Nothing.

Chad, frowning, stamped his leg.

No pain.

Something sloshed though.

‘Well that’s just great-’

He was standing, immersed to mid-thigh in still, dark water, the pool a mirror to the night. Behind him something rumbled, a sound felt rather than heard. He turned, sloshing again. Water, cascading in sheets from a high cliff, shot through with starlight and every myriad point the streak of time-lapse photography.

Waterfall of stars.

Starfall.

Chad, stunned, stepped sideways for a better angle.

Something moved in the water.

Chad, starlit boy, peered back into his own eyes from the depths of the pool.

Behind him, constellations took on new life. The Bull, the Ram, the Hunter. Cruel arc of metal outlined in blue-silver clusters, and fat beads of blood from the animals' throats a scatter of red-shifted supergiants. Animals bucked, Hunter crouched. Chad, intoxicated, moved with them. Night and pool swam together. Sky, water; water, sky. Stars everywhere, whirlpool universe. Chad, suddenly dizzy, could not tell which way was up. He swayed, put out a hand for support, found only starswirl and damp air.

In his hand, the key, sharp-edged and gleaming. Starlight splintered from it drove all other to darkness.

Chad, curling fingers, made a fist around the key.

The stars came out again.

The world snapped back into focus.

'Right then. Think. Can't stand in the water all night. Find the bank. Sit down and take stock. That's it.'

The bank was eighteen wet strides away, the ground a mossy cushion, green-black in the starlight. He sat, drew his legs up to his chin, hugged them, shivering.

No-

Not shivering.

He thought, I'm not cold. I'm drenched. I should be freezing.

The night air seemed to be almost exactly the same temperature as his skin.

'I'm not tired either.' His voice, flat in the still air. No wash of reverb. No swan-line of echoes. The words seemed to hang before him, unmoving. Someone standing only yards away would hear nothing.

'But how far did I run? It must have been miles-'

He stood, prey and bait to puzzle's hook.

The pool unfolded before him, walled by trees, fuelled by rumbling starfall.

'And where am I anyway? There aren't any waterfalls I know anywhere

near the town-'

And finally, 'How on Earth do I get home?'

The last bore some consideration. Chad turned away from the pool, stared into the vaulted line of trees pressing close to his back.

Coloured blobs flashed before his eyes. Movement?

'Hello? Who's there!'

Nothing. His imagination then. An optical illusion caused by fatigue or eyes beguiled by wobbling, waterlogged stars.

Except-

He wasn't tired.

And the pool, a mirror in spite of the waterfall, motionless reflection of the night sky.

Chad, frowning, chewed his lower lip.

'Now let's get this straight. I swallowed the leaves. I chased the dragonflies. I caught one but now it's a key. And I ran so far I don't know where I am or how to get back.'

A shrug.

'Reckon that about sums it up.'

Thoughtful nod.

Chad, eyes searching the darkness for inspiration, lighted on the waterfall, scaled dark rock to the star-silhouetted peak.

'High ground it is then.'

Chad, folding the key in his handkerchief, thrust it deep into his pocket. Then, scoping the lay of the land, turned left and felt his way carefully along the bank of the pool. There were stones but he shied clear of them, wary of wet moss. All I need now is a broken ankle.

The pool unwound to his right, still and flat, dark mirror to a billion azure points and the dusty clouds of nebulae.

He moved slowly, taking care to be as quiet as possible, steering clear of the trees, keeping as close to the water as he could. There was no wind. No breath of man or nature stirred branch or leaf. Chad felt his skin tingle. Something about the stillness of the night was unsettling. He'd never experienced such utter calm. And there was the movement of light, like unblinking eyes he thought he'd seen among the trees. The memory haunted his steps. By comparison the water seemed, well, more friendly. Maybe it was the stars reflected there. The Bull, the Ram, the Hunter. Chad, star struck, indulged himself in a dreamy half smile. More and more often as he walked, Chad felt his gaze wander back to the pool. The stars there felt warm, somehow familiar. They seemed to beckon him to enter the pool, to come to them and be one with them. Chad found it an odd comfort to know he could do so at any time. Any time he liked. Now, for example. All he had to do was take a step sideways. Just a single step and he'd be back in the water again, home forever-

With an effort he tore his eyes away from the water and concentrated on the ground at his feet. The starlit shore unrolled before him, undulating gently, rooted in the earth and clothed in moss. The ground was springy beneath his feet. He expected the suck and slurp of mud but there was none.

As he moved around the pool, he glanced occasionally into the tree line. No light shone there. The canopy was too dense to allow starlight to enter.

'I wonder how far I've come.'

Chad, frowning, spoke aloud for something to hear.

He looked around, puzzled.

Pool. Trees. Endless night.

In the water, constellations, beckoning.

'Why - it doesn't seem like I've moved at all.'

Starfall, clothing dark rock, flashed and shimmered, its constant voice a low rumble, felt more than heard, like machinery humming far off across a distant horizon. No ripples marred the perfect surface of the pond.

'This is no good. Can't just drift off like this. I'll be stuck here forever. Now then. Concentrate!'

Chad, moving again, dream boy to the starlit bank. His feet, pushing softly against the yielding moss, felt nothing. He was mist clothing the water, and stars beckoned.

He blinked, suddenly aware he was not moving.

Chad, frowning, checked his position.

‘That’s odd. When did I stop walking?’

The night, still and warm, no friction or pressure.

Starfall, distant rumble, felt rather than heard.

The Bull, the Ram. The Hunter.

His toes kissed the water’s edge.

Chad, stooping, scooped liquid stars and splashed his face, shaking his head to clear the cobwebs. Shining droplets fell to the pool. There were no ripples. Turning, he began to walk again. This time he counted paces.

‘One, two, three-’

‘-five, eight, eleven-’

With the rhythm of his voice as a guide, Chad found his pace and leaned into the march.

‘-twenty three, twenty four-’

‘-thirty one, thirty two-’

The sound came at thirty six.

He’d been staring into the water again, at one with the stillness, body vibrating in sympathy with the starfall’s distant rumble. The sound came from the tree line, behind him.

-crunch-

Not the crack of a twig or rustle of leaves.

What then? Something familiar and yet-

Chad, shivering, bit his lip. A cold wind threaded the trees carrying the

scent of apple blossom. Jerking around, he peered into the tree line. Spots danced before his eyes, the memory of stars reflected in the pool.

-crunchcrunch-

Chad, clothed suddenly in goose bumps.

‘Who’s there! I’m not afraid you know!’

-cruuuuuuuuunch-

Chad, scowling.

Where had he heard that sound before?

Suddenly angry, he scanned the tree line.

‘That’s it. I’m coming after you, so you better watch out.’

Chad, marching towards the vaulted darkness.

Feet stamping on the moss, barely making a sound.

Moss changing to grass, rushes.

‘Got a whacking great branch here. I’ll give you what for!’

At the edge of the trees Chad stopped.

Nothing.

He waited.

Nothing.

‘Come on then! You great big coward!’

Constellations tumbled softly overhead.

In the trees, the memory of stars.

The Bull. The Ram. The Hunter.

‘Hey! You listening to me?’

Nothing.

‘Yeah. Just what I thought.’

Hesitating on the very edge of the shadows, Chad turned abruptly and stomped back to the shore, where he jagged left and continued around the pool.

‘Showed you!’

It was as if a spell had been broken.

The night seemed to close in around him, not exactly threatening but no longer neutral. He thought, as if I caught its attention when I yelled. As if the night hadn’t noticed me before and now it knows I’m here.

Chad, walking, felt his feet crunch through moss. Mud sucked at his shoes. Roots clung insistently. He became aware of his trousers and jacket, wringing wet, sticking to his arms and legs, and weighing them down.

He started counting paces again.

‘-thirty seven, thirty eight-’

At fifty four paces the ground became hard, a scatter of small stones interspersed with boulders of varying sizes through which he picked a careful path.

Rushes rippled, land-locked star-tide.

At ninety paces he stopped.

Dark rock loomed over him, star-drenched.

He’d reached the waterfall.

He looked up. It had not seemed so high from the other side of the pool.

‘Well, nothing else for it I suppose.’

A quick recce produced useful results: a narrow path, almost hidden in the shadows, snaking up into the cliff face.

Chad, hands seeking purchase on the rock for stability, was thirty feet from the ground when the noise from the trees came again.

-crunch-

Behind and below him, near the base of the waterfall.

On the path?

Chad, craning his neck, could see nothing in the darkness below.

Drawing a breath, Chad began to climb more quickly. The path wound upwards, in and out of rocky outcrops like short tunnels, curling round abutments. Always the rumble of falling water linked him to the rock.

-cru... nch-

He thought he heard the sound again, more faintly this time. Perhaps his follower had not found the path. He increased his speed. Here was a chance of escape.

The path jagged right suddenly, beneath an overhang of rock from which water trickled in icy streams. Chad gasped as the water dripped onto his head and neck. His fingers scraped against handholds in the wet stone. Ten steps took him through the short tunnel.

He emerged into a wonderland.

At first he thought he was in a cavern of ice. Blue-silver streaks curled overhead, a smooth arc of brilliant light. In its glare the rock face glowed, shot through with colour from flame red through glowing amber to charcoal grey; with shadows inked in umber and sea green.

He stared, and realisation came. The roof, not ice but water laced with starfire.

He was under the waterfall.

Chad, blinking, stood entranced.

Behind him a sound.

-crunch-

His follower had found the path and was ascending.

Shocked from his spell, Chad moved again, picking his way as quickly as he dared across the rock bridge beneath a sky full of starfire.

As he moved it seemed to him that the rumble of the waterfall began to change. Still unnaturally distant, it now seemed less like the rumble of water against rocks and more like the distant bellow of voices raised in

anger, a vast crowd yelling in a language he almost knew, the roar a hammer and the world itself an anvil.

Chad, knot of fear tightening in his chest, emerged from the waterfall, took the twisted path at speed, climbing higher, ever higher.

No smooth ride this, no dreamlike rush through time lapsed summer. Sharp rock bit his hands and knees, icy water slapped his face, filling his mouth and eyes, driving breath aside.

He thought, I'm fleeing a dream. At ground level everything's still. Up here it's wild. There's friction here. Sky, earth, everything's at war.

Chad, bursting from the path onto a wide ledge, stumbled, cried out and fell, tumbling to a halt breathless and sweating at the feet of a girl whose beauty struck sparks from the sky.

Chad, looking up, blinked stupidly.

Eighteen amber tears hung on gold at her throat, splintered sunlight.

'Brun-'

Not his sister, the girl in the music box.

And yet – not quite. Not completely.

The curl of lips, the long face, the mischief dancing at the corner of her eyes-

The girl in the picture, yes, the girl in the story too.

The goddess Freya.

But also his sister.

Both girls bound in one body.

Shifting, morphing, one breathing out the other with the flow of starlight on skin.

'Hey! It's me! What're you-'

She looked through him and her gaze took his voice.

He stood, invisible, drunk with the sight of her.

‘Brun-’

She stood, back pressed to the rock, staring out from the cliff, out from the falls, into a future grown dark and heavy with storms.

Chad, slowly, turned away from the cliff.

He was high, far higher than he thought he had climbed.

Far from the pool, the ground.

Far even from night.

Sunlight bloomed, flooded the valley with amber.

An army moved there, storm tide of grey and silver.

Thousands, tens of thousands, countless more; a living carpet to the deepest valley. Leather and steel and muscle, knotted skulls, wood, matted hair and steaming breath. Love and hate and fevered intention. A stinking, lathered, force of nature, slashing and screaming and fighting and dying.

A storm, drained from the sky, set loose upon the earth.

Huge figures, grey-mossed, charged among the armies. Giant dogs – no, wolves - lunging swift of fang and claw among the fighters, eyes like amber lightning, and in their wake, only blood.

The voice of the dying an unbroken clap of thunder as long as the world was old, stretching back and forward in time from the very beginning to the utter end.

At this trump of death came vast figures of ice and stone, the very hills made flesh, with forests for hair and rock for armour, striding to war, carving deep gullies through earth and wolves and men alike.

The fighters roared, fury and fear, no quarter asked and none given.

Chad, blasted by the force of his vision, staggered back against the rock face. His voice, an involuntary cry, wrenched from his lips by shock and lost in the storm-howl of the dying. He collapsed, first to knees then with his back to the rock, in a sitting position.

‘In my wealth, shall no man delight.’

The girl, her voice a melody, heartbreakingly pure, the sound of distant bells or melting ice. The words echoing, squared and cubed, raised to the nth power by forces Chad knew could squash him, and this pinnacle of rock and half the world as if they were no more than a pretty paper toy.

And yet-

The words, once seen engraved in lacquered wood-

Not hers but another's.

Whose?

Chad, pressed back against the rock face, nails broken and fingers bleeding, clutching on for life itself, saw a wolf leap into the sky from the hills above the war and it seemed to him that open jaws, running with gore and pieces of men, were big enough to swallow even the sun.

The wolf howled – its voice a song. The earth resonated in sympathy.

A song Chad knew. The Song of Fenrir.

The song of the Symphonion.

Jaws, snapping shut, hammer to a god's anvil, and the sound ripped up forests, flayed the tops from hills, shook ice from the crowns of distant mountains.

The sky ripped apart.

Chad, screaming, voice lost in the storm.

IN MY WEALTH SHALL NO MAN DELIGHT!

Not the girl now, but a voice from the army. The voice of the army.

The voice of the war.

The words, eruption of sound, slammed him against the cliff, driving his face hard against the rock.

Chad, rattling toy, shaken to his bones.

Even the cliff shuddered, resonating in sympathy with the voice of the storm.

Eyes, driven shut, loaded with stars.

The Bull, the Ram.

The Hunter.

Then a gulp like the sound of a mudslide, and the sun was gone to the wolf's throat, and night returned to earth and boy, and both cried out until each could cry no more.

Then, into the voiceless dark, came a sound.

No man's lament this but woman's, it rose in piercing harmony, a haunting melody that swelled to break cliff and heart, dashing both to slivers on the rocks at the foot of the falls.

'Baldur my love!'

'By my choice are we cursed!'

'I weep for you and pray the earth weep with me!'

Chad, eyes full of tears, and every tear a star. The Bull. The Ram. The Hunter. A drama played out in the bitter shelter of eyes tight shut against the night.

There was more, nested revelation like Russian dolls.

The voice of the girl, Freya, was the voice of his sister.

Chad, eyes screwed tight shut, howled.

Pain, fury, bitter love.

When he opened them again, all was gone. Cliff, pool, waterfall, all gone.

The Milky Way, river of stars, lit charcoal fields.

A road, pitted tarmac framed by hedge, lay before him, an arrow straight cut through the fields to the silver dusted horizon.

He stood, face wet, rimed in bitter tears, feeling as though he had awoken from a terrible dream. A dream more real than any day of his life. Night caught at his throat. He coughed, lungs raw. As if that were the signal a hundred aches and pains assaulted every inch of his body.

Chad, groaning, eased a cramp in his leg.

‘One thing’s for sure. I won’t be sorry to-’

-crunch-

He froze.

Cold knot of fear in his belly.

-crunchcrunch-

Panic a static charge in his head.

Pain in his leg forgotten.

Follower.

He thought, follower, yes, but who – or what - is it?

Then-

Doesn’t matter. Whatever it is followed me out of a dream and into the world.

Like a hand in a brambled church, blood-gloved and dragon-ringed, reaching out from a hole in the world to catch and hold and never let go.

‘Steady.’ His voice, neither as strong or resolute as he would have liked.

‘Steady old fruit. You’re just freaked. Over-active imagination and all that.’

But a hand thrust deep into a pocket, emerging with a handkerchief folded to the shape of a key, made him a liar.

A voice came then, kite-scratch memory.

They were lovers.

Ellyn. Her voice still sharp though her face was a lifetime away.

Lovers at the end of time and they made a key.

Chad, twisting in memory’s glare.

A key is not a tool. A key is intention. A shape cut out of the future.

Like a hunter's prey, wrenched from its life. And just as the death of an animal leaves a gap in its species, so making a key leaves a hole in the future.

Chad, scribe to memory's will, and all images locking together, a smooth mechanism, effortless.

Their love tore a hole in the future.

The girl on the cliff. Freya and her lover. But who was her lover? The man she'd sung of? Baldur? Who was that? Some warrior she'd loved and lost?

In My Wealth Shall No Man Delight.

An affair then. Illicit. Beautiful. Unendurable.

Was he married?

Was she?

They took the end of the world and put it in a music box.

Chad, thrusting the key back into his pocket, snapped his fingers.

'That's it! You were having an affair with a warrior and he was killed on the field of battle-'

-cruuuuunch-

The sound again, driving logic from fear, this time from his right, across a hedge dusted with starlight.

He turned.

From the field, a sound.

Snort of fear. Squeal of panic.

Rush of blade through coarse hair, old leather.

Spatter of something steaming wet.

It was as if a spell had been broken.

Anger surged, red tide through his chest and head.

‘Right, you nosy so and so, you’ve got it coming to you now, and no mistake-’

Chad, wheeling, vaulted the hedge, charged full tilt for the dark. His anger a hammer in the night, and the trees shook aside to let him pass.

Darkness.

Silence.

Chad stopped, feet apart, foursquare in the vaulted shadows, eyes mating with the deeper night.

And then he saw them, a glowing line in the night.

Footprints. A negative image. White on black.

Chad, kneeling, poked the nearest print.

‘Ouch!’

Wet-dry crystals, ice-cold, dusted with summer starlight.

The footprints were made of snow.

Chapter 18

Starlight, soft crystal, dusted the world. The sky turned, tipped past its zenith, tumbled into slow morning. Mist crept into the fields, crouching low to the ground.

Chad, exhausted, stared at the footprints.

They were big, a man's prints. Or bigger, maybe. The kind of footprints a giant hacked from a mountain capped with ice might make as he strode the land on business only he knew. A god's business. The kind of work only a constellation made flesh would sanction. A hunter.

But a hunter of what?

Chad, shivering, watched ice crystals shift and fold, melting.

Not melting.

Reforming, spreading.

The footprints, expanding, infected the ground with frost.

Chad felt the cold spread out from them, carrying with it a thin mist. Where it touched leaf and twig and root, then that green life, dusted white, curled and blackened, surrendering to impossible winter.

He shivered.

Fear touched him, a cold flush.

Something was coming.

His arm jerked, prickling, laced with static. Chad, wincing, lifted his hand. The fingers, white-rimed, crackled softly when he flexed them.

Frost, spreading from his fingertips, to his palm, his wrist and forearm.

A pattern grew there. A hand print, the impression deepening as his skin shrank from the cold, creases forming, as of digits, a fingerless leather mitten, the aching line of a ring cutting across the index finger.

A hand, reaching out from a hole in the world to catch, and grip and never let go.

Frost that thickened, bruising the skin.

Chad, gasping, scraped his arm across his jacket.

Frost grew there.

Cloth, crackling, stiffened. His sleeve, his collar, white-crusted, sparkling with starlight. Pain bit into his arm. He jerked. A blue-white spectrum flashed as he moved. Boy made prism.

Skin stinging, Chad jerked away from the clotting footprints. A cry tore from his lips as he moved. He thought, the same way the skin of your finger might stick to ice in a fridge. But worse. It's like I'm stuck in place, glued to the very air around me. Stuck to the world. Trapped in the footsteps of the Hunter himself-.

'Wake up Chad. You're off your head.'

His voice, lost in a cloud of vapour, ice crystals that condensed on his collar and chest, thickening the rime of frost.

'Think it over. Ice doesn't spread like this. Not on a human body. I'm warmer. The ice will melt.'

But the ice did not melt.

And now he couldn't move.

The footprints, all one now, drew a line to the horizon. Jagged feelers spread out from them, infecting the undergrowth, small bushes, the nearby hedge.

And there was a sound, like machinery humming far away beyond the horizon, across the line of ice drawing winter from an uncertain future into the present moment.

-crunch-

A sound, footsteps in snow.

Chad, groaning, struggled to move, and failed.

Ice, creaking, flaked from his jacket.

Chad, glued in place, felt his chest and arms sting with cold. His collar, ring of ice, clamped tight around his neck. Chad gasped. Frost entered his lungs with the air. His heart, frost clawed, shuddered.

-crunch crunch-

Frost encircled his jacket, squeezing, moving down to his waist, his hips. His eyelids fluttered. His chest heaved. Muscles in his arms and thighs, aching with cold, jerked spasmodically.

Chad, broken machine, stood at attention.

'No-!'

The frost touched his trousers, spreading in crystalline feelers, jagged fingers that clutched and gripped, stinging skin and paralysing muscle.

Chad, frozen, an easy catch.

Prey for the Hunter.

-cruuuuuunch-

'Noooo-!'

His voice, thin, the word twisted by cold.

-crunch crunch crunchcrunchcrunchcrunch-

The frost, spreading down his legs, touched the outside of his pocket – and stopped.

Chad, paralysed, felt a heat grow there. A spark like summer sun on a dragonfly's wing, flame that caught and grew, twisting through fabric and skin.

The frost receded.

Up his jacket, along his sleeves, his collar.

The line of ice, blotched with newly visible ground, separated into footsteps which, crackling, melted into the night.

Chad, shaking, slapped ice from his body and ran.

Away from the footsteps, away from the star-dusted horizon, the white line that was winter on the hunt. Back through the hedge and onto the road, another world, where hard blacktop slapped numb feet, unyielding, almost painful.

In his pocket, a key which had once been a living creature burned like summer, driving away the night.

He ran, exhausted, head down into the dawn.

The footsteps followed, thud of boots on blacktop.

'Whoever you are, you better back off!'

-thud thud thud thud-

'I'm telling you if you don't leave me alone there's going to be- oooff!'

Chad, stunned, rebounded from a wall; solid, yet yielding, and warm. His foot turned and he sat down all too suddenly, the breath driven from his lungs.

'Hey!'

The voice, a familiar drawl.

'Carry on like that and the Olympic team can just hand over their medals.'

'Vincent!'

A hand, reaching down, grabbed Chad and hoisted him to his feet.

'Hey matey, there you go. Right as rain.'

Chad, staring, said nothing.

'You're welcome.'

Chad, staring back along the road, tried to catch his breath. Then, turning, he pushed past Vincent, began to walk.

'Hey, hang on! Where are you off to in such an all fired rush? Anyone would think the hounds of hell were after you!'

'Something - coming.'

Chad did not look back.

'Following me. Hunter. Must get – away-'

'Someone's following you?'

Vincent, friendly grin thinning quickly as he scanned the road in either direction.

'Where? I don't see anything.'

'Footsteps-'

'I don't hear anything either.'

'Stay then. I'm leaving.'

'I can see that. Hold up. You're in no fit state for a marathon-'

'I can manage!'

'Ok, ok, hold your horses! I was only saying.'

'I know.' Chad, frowning, frustration edging his voice.

'What are you doing out here anyway?'

'Nothing. A stroll, that's all. Thinking.'

'At three in the morning?' Vincent, amused. 'Fifteen miles from town? That's a heck of a constitutional.'

'What about you? What are you doing here?'

'Looking for you. Mrs C sent me. Heaven alone knows how she knew you'd be here of all places.'

Chad, limping. 'You drove?'

Vincent, frowning. ‘Car broke down. Dodgy radiator, remember? Thought I had it sussed. Fine all night. Combed every road this side of town. Then coming back – wallop! Steam everywhere. Popped the bonnet and what do you know - the whole radiator’s split open like a tin of beans. Split open and ice all over the show. Even the brake fluid was solid. And the oil. Popped the head gasket off like it was my Dad’s old flat cap.’

Vincent, shrugging.

‘Hence the long ride on Shank’s Pony.’

Chad, listening for a hunter’s footsteps, said nothing.

‘Did you hear a word I’ve said?’

‘Shh. D’you hear that?’

‘What?’

-thud-

‘Come on.’

Chad, turning, found new energy to walk away.

Vincent, bemused, followed.

‘And where the car bunked out – would you believe it? – snow all over the road. Snow! In the middle of summer! I tell you its weird.’

Chad, saying nothing, strode another hundred yards.

‘Too many weird things going on around here lately if you ask me.’

Chad, head down, did not ask.

‘Who do you think’s following you anyway?’

‘Not who.’

‘What do you mean, not who? An animal, you mean? Matey, bears and wolves vanished from hereabouts in the middle ages.’

Chad, saying nothing, put one foot in front of the other.

‘So – ducks maybe? Or else a wily fox?’

Chad, head down, said, ‘Don’t be an ass, Vincent. Brun’s into you – but I’m not my sister. The genial rogue act doesn’t work for me.’

‘Well there’s me, cut to the quick.’

‘Just save your breath for walking.’

A hundred yards drifted by. Two hundred. Half a mile.

Chad, head down, brimming with thoughts.

‘How do you know Mrs C?’

‘Hey, it can talk.’

‘Well?’

‘Everyone knows her. Lived here for years. Dippy old bat. Into herbal remedies, “natural solutions.” Hah. Natural solutions my sainted aunt. Grows her own I reckon. Smokes it an’ all I shouldn’t wonder, right out of her own greenhouse. You shouldn’t hang around her you know. There’s those in town that say she’s a bit touched.’ Vincent, finger tapping the side of his head. ‘You know, a bit looney tunes, like your girlfriend.’

‘Ellyn’s not mad!’

‘Ah. A reaction. The ice-man has a heart.’

‘Ice man?’

Chad, jerked to a stop, visions of a giant carved from a block of ice a wall before him, lost for a moment in the undertow of museum glass and bone and brass; flesh ageing in reverse, growing younger with every passing minute.

‘Ice man! What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘For crying out loud, I only said-’

‘Only said? Only said? Vincent, matey, does your head ever rule your mouth?’

‘It ain’t my fault I got a sense of humour.’

Chad, puffing out his cheeks morosely, walked on.

Another mile drifted by. Two. Five.

-thud-

‘Wait – did you hear that?’

‘Hear what?’

-thud thud-

‘That!’

‘Yeah, so – it’s probably the local farmer milking his horse or whatever it is they get up to in the small wee hours.’

‘That’s no horse. That’s-’

-thud thud thud thud-

Chad, turning, cried out.

He was the Hunter, and he came arrow straight along the road in their wake; a giant, helmed in silver, barrel-chested, with flame for hair and suns for eyes; and his passing was like a great storm, and his boots struck sparks from the blacktop, and each spark was a star, and where they touched the ground, they stuck like splashes of ice, freezing.

He strode towards them, head down, fists like swinging hammers, dragging grey winter like a cape, leaving footprints of snow which merged, creaking, to blister and crack the earth.

‘What-?’

Vincent, dazed, motionless.

‘Is that the Viking from the museum?! How did he-’

Chad, reaching back, grabbed an arm and yanked for all he was worth.

‘Run!’

The Hunter opened his mouth. No sound but a roar of wind emerged. Chad staggered. Vincent reeled. At the roadside the hedge, slapped by the storm, stripped of its foliage, jerked and shuddered.

Chad, peering back through the storm of white-rimed leaves, uttered a

wordless yell.

-thud-

-thud-

-THUD-

-THUD-

Nearby a tree sighed, cracked, gave up its life in a thunder of branches.

‘BAAL-DUUR-’

The word, a name. His voice the crack of rock, the shriek of tectonic plates, the skin of a world ripped by tidal stress.

‘IN MY WEALTH-’

Stars, sucked down from the sky in the wake of that annihilating trump fell like flakes of snow, a blizzard, blinding.

‘SHALL NO MAN-’

Chad, screaming, mind locked on the helm clothing the gargantuan head, the coiled dragon emblazoned there. A dragon with amber tears for eyes.

‘DELIGHT-’

No man this, but a god.

And a god’s work to do.

‘I don’t get it. This is a joke right? Something she put you up to.’

‘She put me up to it alright. But it’s no joke.’

‘I don’t-’

‘Vincent you idiot stop blathering and run!’

Running was like wading through freezing mud. The blacktop, slippery with outrunners of frost, a treacherous road.

Leaves made crystal, blizzard of blue-white, fractured the landscape. Chad, panting, chest aflame, ran a kaleidoscope world where every tree and

bush, every glimpse of the road was multiplied a million-fold, jagged reflections, swirling, intersecting. Stars made crystal blew among them, a storm the Hunter tore from the sky with his presence.

Chad, head whirling, thought, and why not? He's a god, a constellation made flesh. All those stars. All that gravity. He's sucking down the sky. I'll never escape.

'No!'

His voice, fuelled by anger, rage a wall truth could never breach.

'Mustn't stop running – must get – key – Brun-'

Kaleidoscope world spun as he ran, fragments of tree and sky and road, jagged crystal blades that tore at his flesh, his face, his outstretched hands.

'Chad-'

'Vincent – no!'

His grip gone, the older boy lost in a maze of light.

Chad, human dragonfly, jagged, felt hands clothed in fingerless leather lunge from the light storm. Clutching fingers scored glittering fog, the slashed wounds offering a glimpse of inky sky, hedges, road. A hand emerging from a hole in the world, to clutch and hold and never let go.

For Chad, the situation was simple, the reversal ironic. He had been the hunter. Now he was the hunted.

'Chad!'

Vincent, his voice adrift in the storm.

'-can't see - where are – you-'

'Vincent!'

'-keep shouting – I'll-'

'Shut up Vincent! He'll find us!'

'-hear what – you–'

'Shut up!'

Chad, running fragmented stars and nebulae, jagged left, stopped with a thud. Something rough and dark blocked his way. A tree. Silver birch. He slipped around it, fingers glued to smoothly fibrous bark. Scent filled his nostrils: damp earth, bird droppings, decaying leaves. Autumn and Winter, half a year in a single moment, pressed there like dead flowers in a diary, held in place by the Hunter's will – or the power of the Symphonion. A power Chad felt overwhelmingly connected to. A hint of the connection there must be between the music box and his sister. A connection he was determined to sever.

'Chad!'

Vincent, his voice close, a whispered hiss.

Chad, turning, saw the world reflected a million times in dragonfly shards, the pieces so finely grained that for an instant he could see sky and earth, tree and road, all co-existing in the same place at the same time.

Was this how a god perceived? All time and all space in a single moment? Geography, temporality, all one, and the meaning, Russian dolls, nested in patterns so deep as to drown in madness to any who sought understanding.

Chad, panicking, turned from the image. There was no escape. Everywhere he looked past and future met, merged, summed to a shimmering, unignorable solution.

'Dragonflies-'

His voice, broken, shattered kernel in the dense knot of space-time.

He thought, dragonflies took Brun's voice. I caught one and it turned into a key. The key can give Brun back her voice. But how? And why doesn't the Hunter want that? Wait, hang on. How do I know the Hunter doesn't want that? Idiot. Because he's chasing me, of course. But what if he's not. What if he's not chasing me? Is it something to do with the necklace Roger and Hjelle Miyake took? Amber tears which connect Brun to the girl in the music box? Well - is it? Think! No. No. The necklace is a symptom, not the disease. It started before that. Before we even found the Symphonion. Where then? How far back do you go? Ellyn? The stroke victims? They were injured a year ago. Wait – wait. Brun started writing her story a year ago. The story that the music box is making real. That's it! Brun is the girl in the music box. But she's also the song singer, the

Skalden. She can change the ending of the story if she wants. But not if she doesn't have a voice!

Chad, shuddering, fought scream upon scream.

The truth, a spike writhing deep in his skull.

The Hunter wants the key. At any cost.

'But why? The answer's here, I know it. All I have to do is look hard enough and-'

Crystal fragments spun.

The image tore apart.

Chad, turning from the blast, scarred by jagged fragments of yesterday and tomorrow, saw shards of Hunter, shattered god, overlaid upon a human figure – Vincent.

'He's seen you! He's coming!'

Vincent, running.

Hunter, striding.

-THUD THUD THUD THUD-

The figures meshed, their strides coinciding, stepped one into the other, phased, were one.

'Vincent!'

'She will choose you Baldur-'

The words, neither Hunter nor Vincent; a smith's hammer and the voices beaten together as one.

'She will choose you and none shall weep-'

A heartbeat and the image was gone, replaced by a myriad other views.

'Vincent!'

Nothing.

'Vincent!'

No voices.

No footsteps.

The world, suddenly still, uttered a single breath.

The scent of apple blossom and a heartbreaking melody, like distant bells or melting ice.

Flakes of crystal, drifting, settling, melting.

Leaves and stars, all gone, driven aside by a greater light.

The edge of the sun slipped over the eastern horizon, a fingernail of blinding pearl. Morning, broken, wreathed in fog, and Chad, adrift in a sea of softly glowing pearl, drew breath enough to sob.

'Chad? Matey – is that you?'

'Vincent!'

He strode out of the fog with the sun rising at his back, and for a second his hair was flame and his eyes were suns. Then the moment passed, burned away with the fog, and he was just Vincent.

Chad, clutching the silver birch, slid down the bole to crouch, shuddering among its roots.

'You found Yggdrasil then.'

Vincent, stepping closer.

'What?' Chad, his voice sharp with suspicion.

'Yggdrasil. The world tree. Freya and Baldur hid among its roots while the world died.'

Vincent. A smile, thin blade, split his face.

'Don't you ever read your sister's stories?'

'Not that bit.'

'Well come on. I think we've spent enough time shrieking about and scaring the wits out of the local farmers.'

Chad, staring, clambered slowly to his feet.

‘Farmer?’

‘You saw him. Leather jerkin, hobnail boots, all that. Dunno about you but they creep me out, striding around the countryside at ridiculous hours, like they own the place.

‘You think what we saw was a farmer?’

‘Who else? Got a fit of the shakes have we? Seeing ghosts now? Fair dos. I’ll admit he put the wind up me too. But who else could it be? Maybe we were on his land. Lucky he didn’t have dogs with him, you ask me.’

Dogs – or wolves.

Chad, chewing his lip, said, ‘You got close then?’

‘Breathing down his neck. Don’t think he saw me though. Thanks heaven for the fog, eh? At least the key’s safe.’

‘Key?’

Chad, hand diving to his pocket, coming out with the tightly wrapped bundle.

‘How did you know I had a key?’

Vincent, eyes locked on the bundle, hesitated.

‘Mrs C of course. She told me what you were looking for.’

Chad, voice thin. ‘Really.’

‘She said it might be dangerous. That’s why she asked me to meet you.’

‘Right.’ Chad stuffed the key back into his pocket.

‘Yeah. So. Any idea what it opens?’

‘No.’

Chad, turning, began to walk.

He strode firmly, glancing often back along the road.

‘Still think you’re being followed?’

Vincent, running to catch up.

‘Only by you.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Nothing.’

The word, a lie. Chad, mind caught by the image of his parents betraying his sister, added a new name to the balance.

‘You look tired, Chad.’

‘Thanks. I am tired.’

‘I can help you. Here, lean on me.’

‘I can manage.’

‘It’s miles to town. You’ll never make it.’

‘There’ll be a bus. Or a farm. I’ll get a ride.’

‘You reckon?’

‘You should go back to your car, Vincent. In case of accidents. You know the way people drive on country roads. Where is it by the way?’

‘Back up the road a bit.’

‘I didn’t see it.’

‘I rolled it into a field. Maybe that’s why Old McDonald was doing his nut.’

‘Vincent, where did he go? The farmer I mean.’

‘Sorry mate. You lost me.’

‘Well all three of us were within spitting distance. Why didn’t he see us?’

‘The fog-’

‘I don’t think so Vincent. I think he did see us. The one of us he wanted to see, anyway.’

Vincent, eyes narrowed.

Chad, defiant.

‘He wasn’t a farmer, Vincent. He was a Hunter. At first I thought he was after me but I was wrong about that wasn’t I?’

‘Chad, matey, you’re off your rocker if you-’

Chad, mind spinning. ‘Brun showed you the music box. She opened the lid, showed you inside. It marked you. The Symphonion marked you.’

‘Like I said. Rocker. As in totally off your-’

‘I don’t think he was hunting me at all. I think he was hunting you.’

A moment hung between them.

‘I think he caught you, too.’

Chapter 19

Cold morning spilled over a land edged with frost. The sun, lifting, laid stripes of amber and pearl along the side of the farmhouse. A breeze yawned among nearby trees and branches more bare than not scraped together with a hesitant whisper. Somewhere a cockerel announced the day. A distant, mournful voice overlaid by a fainter but purer tone, like distant bells or melting ice. The scent of apple blossom threaded field and hill.

Dew, stealing sunlight with a myriad frozen lenses, cast a hunter's net of stars across the countryside; field, garden, mesh of ivy clotting the farmhouse walls.

Chad, shielding his eyes from the glare, pushed open the barred gate and staggered up the path to the front door. Aching and frozen, a heartbeat from exhausted sleep, he gripped the door knocker and raised it. Made from heavy brass, it shone in the morning sun, coiled loops like a dragon on a silver helm, amber sunlight splintering from its blank metal eyes. When it struck the wood the sound was leaden, dense and flat.

Chad, waiting, heard nothing in response.

He knocked again, louder, this time.

Only echoes answered.

The echoes, too, were flat, toneless.

Birds, moving among the denuded branches, did not react.

Chad, leaning heavily against the door, thought, nothing sounds right since last night. Not the birds, not my footsteps, not the wind in the trees. Everything just thumps, like a broken piano key. It's like even the idea of sound is broken.

‘Or it’s your ears, dummy.’

His own voice, rough grained, keeping him from sleep.

‘Heaven only knows how long you’ve been awake or how far you’ve walked. Has it been a day? Two? More? And now no-one’s answering. So tired. Must stay awake - protect key - Brun-’

‘For heaven’s sake child, what are you doing snoozing here in the cold!’

The voice, harsh, edged with concern.

Mrs C, turning the corner of the house, an empty bag of horse feed folded neatly over her arm, boots crunching on the chipped stone path.

Chad, eyes suddenly wide, eluded sleep one more time.

‘Are you unfamiliar with the concept of a bellpush?’

‘I knocked-’

‘It’s the simplest invention since the William Morrill’s Electric Pig so there’s no excuse for your ignorance!’

‘Uh-’

‘Well? Stop mumbling and come in! Did you get what I sent you for?’

‘I don’t know.’

Chad, dragging himself upright, followed the woman through the house and into the kitchen.

‘What’s an electric pig?’

‘Garbage disposal, boy, garbage disposal! What do you mean, “You don’t know?” Either you got it or you didn’t!’

‘I got it – I think – but it changed.’

‘Explain!’

Chad, grabbing the package from his pocket, peeled away the handkerchief and slammed the key down on the kitchen table.

‘I see.’

Her voice, darker, laced with understanding. She leaned closer but did not touch the key.

‘Transformation then. Not entirely unexpected. Still-’

Chad, anger rising, interrupted, ‘I tell you what - it was unexpected by me! So was running a dozen miles in a few minutes and then taking all night to walk back again! So was being hunted by a man made out of winter – or stars, or something.’

Mrs C, eyes narrowing, shifted her gaze from key to boy.

‘I warned you it wouldn’t be easy. Didn’t you keep your wits about you?’

‘I’m here aren’t I?’

‘Apparently.’

‘And what’s that supposed to mean!’

Chad, anger driving aside tiredness, kicked the table.

Mrs C, considering, said thoughtfully, ‘If a dragonfly can change into a key when it’s caught... what can a boy change into when he’s caught, I wonder?’

‘Well I wasn’t caught!’

Chad, scowling, gritted his teeth.

‘And you know what – I’ve had it up to here with your irritable whining and mysterious ways. Something happened to me last night. I saw something. A storm, a war – something. We’re in danger. Brun’s in danger. So take your key and do something about it.’

A moment hung between them.

The kettle, warmed by two blowtorches, whistled.

Mrs C shook her head.

‘I wanted a dragonfly. You brought a key. What can I do with a key? All you’ve done is torn open a hole in the future.’

‘A key is not a tool. A key is intention. A shape cut out of the future.’

Ellyn's voice. Embers of memory.

' "A hunter's prey, wrenched from its life." '

Chad, his voice, stark with realisation.

'Last night I was a hunter's prey.'

-I thought the Hunter wanted Vincent but maybe Vincent was just a trap to catch me, a human trap set by a man made of stars-

'That means someone – something – wanted to make a key out of me.'

Mrs C, eyes flashing cold fire.

'Who? Or what? More importantly – why?'

Chad, wracked with sudden understanding.

'You can't help her, can you?'

Mrs C, avoiding his gaze, said nothing.

'My sister. She's upstairs in your attic room wasting away to nothing and I went through all that and now you can't help her! Is that what you're saying?'

'There is much I can do. The key will fit something. The music box perhaps.'

'There's already a key for that. Brun found it.'

A key from the past that made a hole in the future, his present, a hole in the world from which came a hand to grab and hold, and never let go.

Mrs C, wreathed in fragrant steam, set mugs on the table.

'Some keys are made to open locks, some keys to close them.'

'That's nonsense!'

'We will not know which kind this is until we try it. Drink.'

'Later-'

'Now!'

‘Alright, alright. Hold your horses.’

The tea, hot and fragrant, went down easily.

‘Anyway - try it where?’

‘The Symphonion.’

‘That’s back at the farmhouse. And last time I got anywhere near it the thing split open my head like a rubbish sack and dumped a thousand year-old war in there.’

‘What else then? What else do you know with a lock? Think boy! Your sister’s life may depend upon it!’

‘I don’t know – the museum cases, maybe. Doors at the library – nothing particular!’

‘Then our course is clear. You must fetch the Symphonion.’

‘I – what – ?!.

Chad, slamming mug against table, spilled hot tea.

‘Do you have any idea how weird that thing is? How dangerous? And you want to bring it here? It plays music without disks!’

‘And makes winter from summer, flesh from stars.’

‘Exactly! And turns people into... I don’t know – turns people into myths - gods, maybe-’

Fear and anger, swelling together, dark undertow, a tide against which he fought with bitter strength.

‘Not Brun! Not my sister!’

‘Then fetch the Symphonion!’

Chad, breathing steam, shook his head.

‘No. I did what you wanted once already; all I’ve done is answer questions with more questions and nearly die in the process.’

Mrs C, lips flattened to a thin line of disapproval.

‘The choice, of course, is yours.’

‘Well, lucky me!’

Mrs C, arms folded, said nothing.

‘It’s a pretty obvious choice then.’

Chad, pushing aside his chair, stood.

‘Ellyn knows about keys. She told me. I need to see Ellyn.’

Chad, standing, shuddered with exhaustion.

‘Need-’

‘Need- to see-’

Sleep claimed him first.

Chad, dreaming, clothed in bark, huddled in tree roots, living wood nurtured by ice and fire. Wood that knew past and present and future as one, that saw as a god sees, whose fruit, days; whose branches, long years; whose pollen, stars.

Beside him, a girl, dressed in white, armoured with light. Her eyes flashed, cold fire and him the spark.

-I love you Baldur-

-Freya!-

-We’ll be safe here my love- Safe!-

-Safe? From what?-

But she was gone, lost in the weave of root and branch.

Another rose to take her place.

-I love you Baldur-

-It’s Chad, thanks very much for noticing-

-Named for field of battle where won you my heart-

-Shut up! Shut up about battles and hearts and love! What do you know about it anyway-

-Hel am I, wedded to the Land of the Dead. Born deaf to words of love and now can hear. Baldur my love, a bargain was struck and you the prize-

-Shut up shut up-

-The weavers' pattern cannot be broken-

-SHUT UP!-

-She chose you and none shall weep-

Chad, tasting many lips, kisses like melting ice, senses clogged with the scent of apple blossom, a heartbreaking melody like distant bells or melting ice-

-Falling-

-IN MY WEALTH-

-Falling-

-SHALL NO MAN-

-Falling to war, and the heart of the storm gathered around him, eager for the kill-

-and his arm, gone now to shreds of skin and gore-

-and the blade, cold heart, writhing in his chest-

-and his breath, stilled as an ice dammed pool-

-and her lips, a breath to steal him away-

-away-

'-away from me! Get away from me right-'

Afternoon sunlight spilled across his bed as he awoke, staggering upwards through gothic tiers of dreams, struggling to remember what he had seen, that which had passed, or perhaps would come to pass too soon.

Chad, blinking, disentangled himself from damp sheets.

‘Oh my giddy aunt-’

Chad, head full of light and unwanted memories, groped for his shirt.

Later, over chips and soup, he began to feel human again.

‘You followed the dragonflies.’

Mrs C, probing.

‘Mmm- yes, I said.’

Chad, shovelling chips like a train stoker.

‘You caught one and it became a key.’

‘That key.’

It rested on the table between them, all hint of warmth, of dazzling starlight gone, just a lump of metal now, chased silver and grime embedded in the pattern, pocket fluff and boy sweat. Mrs C, eyes narrowed, studied metal and pattern. Her hand, reaching out as if to scrub dirt from the surface, reveal some inner secret, hesitated, then suddenly withdrew.

Chad, stirring soup, did not miss the moment.

‘And you were lost, so you climbed a cliff to get the lay of the land, and you saw men fighting.’

‘Not just men. Mountains. Giants made of rock and ice. A wolf that ate the sun and the moon. It wasn’t a fight. It was a war. The last war ever.’

Chad, dunking chips, felt sudden understanding.

‘A storm to wash away the world.’

‘It was Ragnarok you saw. The utter end of all things.’

Her voice, bleak, a hook and him the bait.

‘That’s right! And- And there was a girl. Freya. I wanted her to leave but she wouldn’t come with me-’

‘The weavers awake.’

Her voice, dream-fragment, warmer now but no more comforting for it.

‘And then the cliff, the girl, the war... all were gone. And there was just the road.’

‘And you were followed, you say?’

‘Hunted, yes. By a man made of stars!’

‘It was no man that hunted you, I think.’

A moment hung between them.

‘The Bull, the Goat, the Hunter. These things are old, older than the world has any right to know-’

‘Well I knew them last night, alright!’

Chad, gulping hot soup, warded off cold memories.

Mrs C, eyes narrowed, hoarding her thoughts.

‘The Hunter. This one is known to me. I did not think you would meet him so soon.’

‘Meet him? I’ve known him for ages. So has Brun. It’s Vincent! Somehow – don’t ask me how – they’re the same. Or rather – what I mean is - they became the same last night. How is that possible?’

‘Stars made flesh. The Constellation of the Hunter is come. The hour is later than I thought.’

‘And Brun?’

Chad, scarfing chips, tasted cold fear with the hot food.

‘I checked on her you know. Just now, before I came down. She looked at me, right at me and... her eyes... her eyes!’

Chad, shuddering, clasped the hot mug of soup to his chest, the sting of hot ceramic barely noticable against the sting of unwanted memories.

‘She’s barely there! What are we going to do?’

‘Have patience! All that can be done we are doing.’

‘That’s not good enough! You sent me to get a dragonfly. Impossible! But I did it! Now we have a key. That must mean something! Don’t tell me

you can't do anything! I don't want to hear that!'

A breath.

'For now there is something else to consider. A matter of more pressing importance.'

'Oh yes? Like what!'

'How you escaped Vincent – this Hunter he has become.'

Chad, angry, choked on brown sauce.

'You should know. It was you who sent him after me!'

'Are you so sure?'

It's what he said!'

'And you believed him?'

'Well it's not like he's got-'

Chad, swallowing chips, frowned.

'No, hang on. That's a fair point, I suppose. Why would I believe him any more than I believe you?'

Thumping the table angrily.

'This whole thing is a right old cat's cradle!'

'I must know what happened between you!'

'If you must know I don't honestly remember...'

'Convenient.'

'Isn't it just!'

A moment.

'You think I'm lying?'

'You think I am.'

'I have reason to!'

Mrs C, grinning suddenly. ‘Everyone’s mad here but me and thee. Sometimes I’m not so sure about thee...’

‘Yes well. You got that right.’

A moment passed. Blowlamps hissed. Soup bubbled.

‘Anyway, I’m not even sure I did escape. I don’t see how I could have. And everything’s been weird ever since last night. Everything I can hear sounds dull as if I’ve got water in my ear or something. Sounds just – well, thud like a broken piano. And colours, shapes, tastes, smells, everything is just bleached out like an old photograph.’

Silence, a connecting thread, drew out between them.

‘Anyway, you’re the clever one! You tell me how I escaped! You tell me what’s going on!’

Chad, sweeping aside the food, locked eyes with hers.

‘You know what – I never really had a chance to think about it until now – but just who exactly are you? Why have you taken such an interest in Brun and me?’

‘I am a neighbour, nothing more.’

Her voice, echo from a far distant place.

‘Maybe you started out that way but not any more. Something’s happening around here. Seasons are changing, people too - and you’re no different. So tell me! If you want me to trust you, tell me! Maybe then we can get something done. Maybe then we can help Brun.’

She sat then, and it seemed to him she shrank also. And the seams in her face so sharp until now softened as if with an inner warmth.

‘Confident and relentless, imaginative and enquiring.’

Her voice, lighter, the hint of a smile gracing her lips.

‘Fine qualities for a warrior.’

‘I’m no warrior!’

‘No hint of humour of course, still that will come.’

‘Stop prevaricating!’

‘Is the truth so very frightening?’

‘The truth is always frightening.’

‘Then why ask me who I am?’

‘My stepmother Hjelle Miyake said – says – the truth can be a prison cell or an open room. She says each holds its own unique fear. And each a door through which we must pass.’

Chad, face alight, issued an inarguable challenge.

‘I don’t want to know. I have to know.’

Mrs C, folding her arms, leaned back in her chair.

‘Do you now.’

Sunlight crawled across the table.

A moment stretched out between them.

Chad broke it first.

‘Hjelle Miyake was – is - taking an MA in military history. I asked her once why she was doodling dragonflies on her notebook. She told me dragonflies were a part of the traditional Samurai crest. Such a harmless thing as a symbol of violence – the juxtaposition helped her focus, I think.’

‘You think I am conflicted?’

‘I think you have many sides. I’ve seen one. I want to see the rest. I need to see the rest. Or asking me to trust you is a waste of time.’

She stood, turned away, arms folded. For a moment her shoulders slumped, then she straightened and it seemed to Chad she was even taller than before.

‘Finish your soup.’

Mrs C, turning, her face livid.

‘On any other day I’d not be spoken to so – not by one such as you.’

Chad, breath stilled in his throat, waited.

Her fists, clenched, every muscle locked, body held under perfect tension.

She spoke then and her voice the hymn of steel in flesh.

‘Vítt er orpit fyri valfalli

‘Rifs reiðiský rignir blóði;

‘Nú er fyri geirrum grár upp kominn

‘Vefr verþjóðar er þær vinur fylla

‘Rauðum vepti Randvés bana.’

Chad, eyes wide, recoiled as if from a blow.

‘You are glass, boy, and I can see your dream!’

‘No!’

Arms folded she sat, head low and eyes level, a hunter’s gaze, and him the prey.

‘You know this tongue?’

‘No – yes – I don’t know! I keep hearing it - far away, in dreams – like a - I don’t have the words - like a storm or a great battle – do you know what it means? Tell me!’

‘It is a Skald. A verse from the Song of Darraðar. Written in 1014 it describes the fall of the last true Irish King, Brian Boru, to Viking forces at the battle of Clontarf.’

‘Clontarf – where’s that?’

‘Closer than you might think.’

‘What kind of answer’s that?’

‘The only one you’ll get, boy, with that attitude!’

Chad, gaze lost to the undertow, drowning in time’s tide.

‘1014... that’s nearly a thousand years ago.’

‘Boy can count. Your brains can’t be that addled then.’

Chad, lost in the past, clawed his way back to now.

‘Tell me!’

‘Patience! The truth is hard won here, and I must think on how much is safe to tell.’

Still seated, yet she seemed to grow before him, towering high and star-lit from blowlamp flames. She spoke then, and her voice was like a great army howling far away in a language he almost knew. And her words, the hymn of steel in flesh, wove a dream about him, and in his dream he saw nine women, beautiful and terrible, armoured in leather and stars; nine women working a loom, and the sound of it was machinery humming across a far distant horizon; and in the weave a pattern of blood and war grew with frightening speed.

‘Blood rains from the cloudy web

‘On the broad loom of slaughter.

‘The web of man grey as armor

‘Is now being woven; the Valkyr

‘Will cross it with a crimson weft

‘The warp is made of human entrails

‘Human heads are used as heddle-weights

‘The heddle rods are blood-wet spears

‘The shafts are iron-bound and arrows are the shuttles

‘With swords we will weave this web of war.

‘Let us now follow the king to battle

‘Where warriors banners are forging ahead

‘Spears will shatter, shields will splinter

‘Swords will gnaw like wolves through armor

‘The blood-spattered shields that guarded the king.

‘As a blood-red cloud darkens the sky

‘The heavens are stained with the blood of men

‘We pronounce a great king destined to die

‘The men of Ireland will suffer a grief

‘That will never grow old in the minds of men.

‘Let us now weave the web of war

‘Only the Valkyr can choose the slain.’

Chad, waking from a dream of star-washed blood, struggled merely to draw breath.

‘And now you know, Chad named for the field of battle. Now you know the truth of the matter.’

Mrs C, eyes made stars, voice made thunder.

‘The weavers are waking. And make no mistake it is for you they wake! For you they ride!’

Chad, ice-cold, a bloom dead in winter.

‘They wake. They ride. Nothing now can stop them.’

Chad, head exploding with questions.

‘But... that’s not enough! Who are they? What do they want with me? Where do they come from? When are they coming? Why awake now? How do you know so much about it anyway? Who are you!’’

Her voice, mist on a field of charnel, still and silent.

Chad, reeling.

‘Tell me!’

A crash then as of a door opening.

A breath of cold noon air to wake boy and kitchen.

A figure, dufflecoated and scarfed, bespectacled, beautiful.

‘You didn’t answer his question.’

‘Ellyn!’

‘Any answer I can give you would think a lie.’

Mrs C, and her voice the whisper of blood on grass.

‘But you will believe.’

‘Chad, come with me.’

‘You’re off your trolley! Pub short of a six-pack! The end of the world and people made of stars! What about my sister? What about Brun!’

‘She is lost to you now.’

‘No! I don’t believe it! I won’t believe it!’

‘Then fight for her boy! Fight! Or choose another.’

Her gaze a spear; the girl her target.

‘Oh I’ll fight alright!’

Chad, scooping the key into his pocket, ran from the kitchen into the world as if the very hounds of hell howled and clawed at his heels.

If only I knew how.

Chapter 20

‘You never told Mrs C how you got away from Vincent.’

The Crown, blotched with frost like patches of daisies, stabbed hard and cold into a sky like beaten lead. No colour from buttercups or people softened the bleak escarpment. The air was still and there was a flavour of metal on the wind as of something coming towards them. Something harsh, bitter and vicious. A storm, a war, the end of the world.

Chad thought, is this is how a rabbit feels in the second before the wolf strikes?

He said, ‘How long were you listening?’

‘Oh, ages. I was scrunched down under the window sill.’

Chad, frowning, somewhere between annoyed and impressed.

‘Why were you even there?’

‘Because I- Because you’d get into serious trouble without me to look out for you.’

‘Serious trouble with some other nutty girl you mean?’

‘That depends.’

Her lips, twisting, made an impish smile.

‘Fine I’ll bite. Depends on what?’

‘It depends, Chad named for field of battle, on whether you love me for myself or just for my sexy modern metal detector.’

Chad, shaking his head, unable to suppress a groan.

‘You’re mental.’

‘Everyone’s mental, Chad. It’s a direct result of having minds.’

Ellyn, spinning, arms like windmill sails.

‘You have to admit, though, no-one can accessorize like this girl can.’

A laugh warmed Chad’s belly.

‘I can’t argue with that.’

‘Good!’

‘Unless of course, yours truly is merely Fashion-Girl’s latest fab accessory.’

‘How like a boy to spoil the mood.’

‘And I suppose it’s no good wishing for a straight answer from you any more than Brun or Vincent or Mrs C is it?’

‘You could wish for the moon; for you I’d give it up.’

A moment of quiet. Cold waves sloshed distantly. Somewhere a gull screeched. Blades of frost-sharpened grass rattled together like tiny spears in the wind.

Chad, growing uncomfortable, chewed his lip.

‘I wish you wouldn’t say things like that. It’s too weird.’

Her smile, fading.

He sighed. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be-’

‘It doesn’t matter if you don’t love me.’

Her voice, when it came, dull as the sky and just as heavy.

‘The question is, do you trust me?’

Chad, puffing out his cheeks.

‘That’s the question alright.’

Chad, turning, scuffed his way along the Crown, following the line of

broken-backed trees, rubbing his palm thoughtfully against salt-dusted bark, tracing gnarled ridges with a finger.

Branches, bare of leaf or bud or pollen, spoke softly in the wind. Chad, listening, heard voices far away in a language he almost knew.

Beyond the trees lay the sea, a grey tide capped with icy green and claw-scratches of white. Clouds hung low in the sky, a prison for the cries of gulls, distant waves, his footsteps.

'It's the middle of June.'

His voice, lonely, threaded eerily humming branches.

'But there's no sunshine, no flowers or pollen. But there is frost on the ground. And all the pipes frozen up... and the cars, the radiators... it's summer – and yet it's winter.'

'As if months were dice and someone threw a double six.'

Her voice, a lifeline, thread of warmth in the cold day.

'Both seasons face up at the same time.'

For Chad the conclusion was inescapable.

'Something's messing around with time.' Conviction. 'The Symphonion. Brun's music box. It was weird before but ever since I played the disk... ever since then... everything's just been completely mad.'

Chad, palm flat against bark, felt distant voices, the sound humming along his arm and into his mind, current in a wire, forces polarising.

'I don't feel connected anymore. Not to the world. Not to people. Not to feelings. Pain, fear, it's like they've all taken a hike somewhere, I don't know, over there.'

His arm, signpost for a far distant shore.

'Over the rainbow or something.'

He turned. She was inches away. Chad, moving his raised hand, slipped his fingers inside the hood of her duffle coat.

'I'm numb.'

He shivered.

‘I’ll warm you.’

Her hand, lifting, pressed hood and hand to her face. His fingers touched her cheek, hair, warm plastic tucked into her ear. The world, mirrored in her glasses, gazed back at him from her eyes.

‘Do you like me Chad?’

‘Do you want to help me?’

‘Of course I do!’

‘I want to believe you.’

Yet there was a wall in him. A barrier that would not yield to her presence.

‘Forces are polarising. That’s what you said.’

‘Do you want to kiss me? I wouldn’t mind.’

Something churned inside him.

‘You’ve always worn this duffle coat. Even when it was blazing hot. You knew winter was coming didn’t you? Somehow you knew things were going to change.’

Her hand, falling, the pressure of her fingers gone.

‘Poor Chad. All alone on the field of battle.’

Her voice, distant, lonely, ever hopeful.

‘You need a good kiss, I’ll bet.’

‘I’ll make it top of my list for Christmas.’

Ellyn, blinking, rubbed moisture from her glasses.

‘There’s something I want you to see.’

The three storey building hunched in the lee of the Crown, sandstone walls and casement windows summer-bleached as if by savannah dust; steep roof and sprawling wings crouched behind clawed wire fence.

Vagrant sand, wind driven, swirled across the near-empty car park. A gate, webbed steel, hung foursquare from stone pillars, one topped by a weatherworn knob of stone that might once have been a lion.

Chad, transfixed by the animal, pierced by cliff-top memories of storm and war, saw not a lion but a wolf, leaping high to swallow the sun.

He thought, this whole place seems ready to pounce.

Inside the building, the halls were wide, carpeted in grey and scented with apple blossom disinfectant; magnolia walls punctuated with prints by French Romantic artists.

'Negative space.'

Ellyn, drifting, ghost-girl among the violence and chivalry of a bygone age, fingertips kissing knight, maiden, castle.

'An object defined only by its surroundings.'

To Chad the paintings seemed suddenly to be the most real things he had ever seen; skin and armour, silk and stone all summer-hot, the girl a winter-pale intrusion into their resplendent lives.

He thought, walking here I feel like a ghost. But who am I haunting?

'What is this place?'

His voice, a whisper, still shockingly loud.

She turned then, her face a mirror to pain and joy.

'I lived here. Before.'

Understanding bloomed.

'The convalescent home?'

'Sun Valley Residential Accommodation. The stroke victims I told you about live here. There were eighteen of us. Nine are left.'

'And you were the only one who walked out?'

'The others can walk. Some of them. What worlds they tread... I couldn't say.'

‘How come the guy on the front desk let us in so easily?’

‘I have special privileges.’

‘Because you were a resident here?’

‘Because I own the home.’

‘What!’

‘The Museum of Natural History paid very well for their chance to display the man we found in the ice.’

Ellyn, half-smiling, gestured with her metal detector.

‘When Father died I inherited. I used the money to buy this place. The Council wanted to close it down, you know. Move the residents inland. A larger facility, they said, with better care. That wasn’t right. These people are my friends. This is their home.’

A moment hung between them.

‘The eye of their hurricane.’

Her eyes, holding him, sought something – understanding?

‘Wow. All this and you never said.’

‘If it helps think of me as the sea.’

Her voice the wind smiling, her words the soft rush of waves on a far distant shore.

‘All sorts of hidden depths to plumb.’

Chad, cold, felt something churn in his stomach.

‘What are we doing here, Ellyn? How does this help Brun?’

‘Help her?’

‘Yes help her!’

His voice, an urgent hiss.

‘That is the point isn’t it?’

‘Are you sure you want her to wake up?’

Her voice, drifting, soft thread of sound.

‘Wake up? I thought you were listening! She’s not just asleep she’s – I don’t know – thinner somehow. Less there. Fading.’

He thought, like an old TV losing its channel. On a bad day you could search forever and never get a signal.

‘I helped you.’

His voice, cold.

‘Oh?’

‘In the museum. When you were sick.’

Chad, angry, offered his hand.

‘I still have the teeth marks!’

‘So you do.’

‘So what are we doing here, Ellyn? Just a friendly visit with your mates from the ‘hatch – or is it something more?’

‘Something significant?’

Ellyn, ghost girl, said nothing.

‘She’s my sister!’

‘And loves you.’

‘For crying out loud, why does everyone around here keep harping on about love?’

Her finger, tracing a picture frame, the buildings and figures within.

‘The Neo-Classical artists. They understood romance. Look at the details, the cloth the skin, the expressions. Hyper-real. Everything is hyper-real when you’re in love. The tiniest detail stands out in stark contrast, a knife edge, like shadows on the moon. Cloth you could fold. Swords that could slice you apart. Horses that could run from horizon to horizon. People you could love forever. Meaning exists where you never saw it

before.'

Her finger, travelling, touched a second painting, a third.

'You know, there's a reason love is associated with the moon. It's very simple. Love is like gravity, the driving force behind the human tide. Without love we're a clock and no key. Everything... just... stops.'

A moment hung between them, ghost of future things.

'So the world becomes negative space. You and me, the subject perhaps of someone else's painting, nothing more than objects defined only by the changing space around us.'

Chad, hands thrust into pockets, felt a shape there, cold metal splines, hooped grip. The key, once a living thing, folded heavy as lead in his fist.

'And what if the moon is gone? What then, Ellyn? Does that mean love is gone too?'

Silence.

'OK, fine. You rattle on with the art lesson. I'm leaving.'

Chad, patience gone, turned, took a step - and stopped.

A line of people was crossing the hall.

Five in all, two men and three women, grey people, shapeless in pyjamas or casual indoor dress. Slippers or bare feet hushed across the carpet. Their faces... their faces were... Chad, frowning, couldn't put his finger on it. Something connected them but just what it was escaped him.

They moved softly, silently, eyes gazing straight ahead as if fixed on the next moment, and the next and the next, one after another, variations on a theme, footprints in snow.

They did not look at Chad.

'What's going on?'

Chad, treading thin ice, suddenly unsure what to feel.

'Activity hour.'

Somewhere a clock ticked.

‘Look Chad. I want to help you. I want you to see them.’

‘Why?’

‘You’re feeling down, disconnected, depressed. I know what that’s like. I wanted to show you how bad things could really get. I wanted to show you where I was when I... OK, it’s stupid, I know, but I thought seeing them might lift your spirits a bit.’

Chad, wanting to march away, hesitated instead.

‘Why didn’t you say so?’

‘It’s hard for me.’

‘To come back?’

‘To reveal so much of myself.’

‘Why do it then?’

The clock, ticking, marked a full minute of hush.

‘Just come with me. Be with them. Just for a while. What harm can it do?’

Chad, saying nothing, chewed it over.

‘Please.’

‘Alright.’

The activity room was a large open space containing tables and chairs. Evidence of leisure time lay scattered around. Game boards, books, children’s wooden building blocks. A small loom, festooned with coloured wool, sat unused upon a table. A television, mounted on one wall, showed soft grey, a blank screen. The far wall, curved, fitted into a rear extension of the house. Wide, high French windows gave onto a screened balcony with a view past the lee of the Crown to the ocean.

The room, full of natural light, held nine figures, men and women soft-lit in pearl and grey. Five of the figures were standing, four were seated, three at tables and one in a wheelchair. The scent of apple blossom drifted in across the balcony. Someone was humming, a heartbreaking melody, like distant bells or melting ice.

Chad, studying the figures closely as he followed Ellyn into the room, was again struck by an odd similarity between them, their expressions, their body language, something almost subliminal. He couldn't quite pin it down.

None seemed as real as the figures in the paintings.

Chad, frowning, looked at the blank TV screen, the equally blank faces reflected in the glass, grey within grey, like figures buried in ice. He thought, nine channels of dead air. The receiver's on but no-one's transmitting.

Or no– Chad corrected himself abruptly. It's much simpler than that. They're like under-paintings. As if they haven't been finished yet. They're not real people at all. Just patterns of light and shade with the potential to be real people.

Chad, pleased with himself, ventured a tiny grin.

Nine grey smiles shone as if in a mirror.

Chad, startled, took a half step backwards.

Nine heads came up, dead level; eyes fixed ahead in whatever direction they'd been facing.

'Are they aping me?'

His voice, hoarse, loaded with tension.

Nine mouths shaped a silent response.

Ellyn, ghost-girl, weaving a path between the nine.

'You're important to them.'

'Because I'm a visitor?'

'Because you have weight and significance. You drive their tide. Don't worry, they can't hurt you. Not like this. Most of them can't even speak. Oh, they can communicate, if you know the signs and you're patient. But speech to these is a treasure you'll need more than a metal detector to find.'

'OK, well, thanks and everything, but I think I'll just take my chances with the depression.'

Chad, turning to leave, found instead that he had taken a step deeper into the room.

Frowning, he turned and moved again. One step. Two.

The wide doors were even further away, and now there was an activity desk between him and the exit.

He moved again.

Three people stood between him and the doors.

Chad, out of the shallows and suddenly floundering, resisted the urge to run.

‘Ellyn, what’s going on? I can’t find my way out.’

‘Don’t be silly. The door’s just there.’

‘I’m not being silly! This happened to me before- never mind.’

He tried again. Same result.

His frown deepened.

Nine puzzled faces, mirror frowns, peering into every corner of the room.

‘They think it’s a game.’

‘Believe me it’s no game!’

‘Sshh. You’ll frighten them. Stand still. That’s it. Now turn around to face me. Good. You’re only nine steps away. Can you see me?’

‘I’m not an idiot! Everything looks normal. It’s just when I move-’

‘Alright, let’s test it. Take a step towards me. Just one. There. Now you’ve only eight left to go. How about another. Another. Now there’s only six. You see? Easy! Now just turn around and do the same thing towards the door.’

‘No. It won’t work. Something’s keeping me here. Something wants me to stay. Don’t you feel it? Like gravity. A black hole. Something massive, inescapable.’

Her face, creasing in sympathy.

‘Chad take my hand. Maybe this was a mistake. Maybe we should leave.’

‘Your hand?’

‘Yes. Take it now.’

Chad, reaching, froze in the act.

Nine arms rising, mirror hands spread, fingers hooked.

‘Ellyn!’

Nine mouths open, framing silence.

No, not silence.

A breath, a whisper, words.

‘I thought you said they couldn’t talk?’

‘I didn’t think-’

‘They’re talking about my sister!’

‘I can’t hear anything.’

‘Don’t be obtuse. Listen!’

‘I think we should leave now. You’re scaring them.’

‘Me scaring them?’

Chad, jerking back from her touch, found himself deeper in a maze of whispers.

In my wealth shall no man delight-

She will choose you and none shall weep-

The weavers awake-

We wake! We ride!

‘Didn’t you hear that?’

‘Hear what? Come on now Chad, you’re-’

‘Don’t touch me!’

He moved then, and the room seemed to move with him, and every step was matched by the things he could not escape.

Reaching arms.

Open mouths.

Staring eyes.

And then they stood, the nine a storm and him the eye. And everywhere he turned was a grey mirror to his fear, and it seemed to him that those faces seemed less like people, less like men and women and more like bruises; marks on bodies that he couldn’t quite see yet; scars that shifted, healing as he watched to reveal figures that bloomed, spring flowers, rich and vibrant.

Underpaintings, and colour spilled across the canvas.

And soon it seemed to him that they weren’t people at all but something more, something stronger and brighter, more intense and meaningful.

Nine women, beautiful and terrible to see, armoured in leather and stars, steel helms set with amber tears scraping the high ceiling.

On black mares they sat, and their eyes were black storms.

They spoke then, and their voice the sound of thunder, of grinding rock; elemental pressures, irresistible.

‘Sigrún we;

‘Kára and Skögul;

‘Mist and Geirahöd;

‘Gunnr and Róta and Skuld and Göndul.

‘Wotan our Father; to Freya we belong.

‘The weavers awake! To war we ride!

‘For Wotan! To war!

‘We ride! We ride!’

Chad, overwhelmed, fell backwards against a desk, scattering the loom and all its patterned weft.

Above him the horses, rearing, hooves poised to smash down, and it seemed to Chad that their bodies passed through the ceiling of the room, except the room did not seem to be there any more, just a gigantic plain, trapped under layers of grey and black cloud, a storm, slashed through with lightning, jagged flame that burned in their eyes and faces, and upon the steel of their helms and shields and swords.

And the horses’ hooves fell like hammers, slamming into the ground, eighteen as one, and the sound was the death knell of a world.

Chad, driven to kneel, screamed and covered his ears.

The sound did not fade. Instead it grew, gathering and rolling outwards in all directions, becoming the shriek and clash of war, a storm to end all storms.

Warriors screaming, the flash of lightning on swords and shields, a valley filled with the dead and dying. Before him, a grey wolf the size of a horse with blood stained jaws, lay still.

The air, hot with the breath of the dying.

The ground, slippery with their blood.

And Chad, hunched into a tiny ball, thought he heard a voice say his name.

‘Baldur.’

He tried to open his eyes. They would not work.

‘Stand up Baldur.’

Chad, trembling, every muscle locked and protesting, forced his eyes open.

Towering above him was a tenth rider, veiled and helmed, riding a black mare. The nine fell back from the sheer force of her presence.

The warrior leaned towards him. Her face was one he knew. A face to

put the stars themselves to shame. Splinters of amber sunlight burned on a golden chain at her throat, eyes star blue and infinitely deep. His sister's face. And yet not.

'Brun – no – Freya – but that's-'

'Baldur. My love.'

Chad, raising his arm, saw only shreds of muscle and leather.

'No!'

She leaned from the horse and kissed him. At the touch of her lips time stopped. All sound fell to silence. Jagged lightning ran the sky, kite strings of dazzling light.

She shall choose you and none shall weep.

Swords poised like stilled pendulums.

Mouths open in soundless cries.

Filth and sweat and stinking gore, splashed to the four winds, frozen in mid air.

'Brun-'

But she was gone, and before him stood another, equally beautiful, swathed in black.

'You are mine now. You will live in my home.'

'No I won't! I won't leave her! I love her! Freya!'

His voice, no child's but a man's, deep and resonant.

'The decision is no longer yours to make. She has chosen you, Baldur, son of Odin. And none shall weep.'

And so the battlefield receded, frozen light at the end of a tunnel, but before it vanished entirely he thought he saw nine women, beautiful and terrible, mounted upon nine rearing black mares, give voice to shame the storm.

'FOR WOTAN! TO WAR!'

‘WE RIDE! WE RIDE!’

Chapter 21

‘I don’t remember seeing scarecrows in these fields.’

Chad, head reeling from the vision of war, pushed his way through the dull day towards Appledore farmhouse. There was a pressure here, as if the air itself had turned to elastic. The harder he fought to reach the holiday home his parents had rented, the harder it was to move.

‘Oh they’ve always been here.’

Ellyn, moving lightly across the hard-furrowed field, suffered no difficulty walking.

‘People don’t notice them. People don’t really notice anything on an average day. Not unless it has a direct impact.’

Hush. Footsteps in snow. Somewhere a rook screamed.

‘Wouldn’t you say?’

‘I have no opinion. It was just a thought.’

Chad, feet dredging as if through soft sand, sucked a tired breath of lifeless air.

A moment stretched out between them, feet crunching on the frost-rimed ground, breath steaming, twin columns in the pearl-grey daylight.

‘Why did you want to come here, Chad?’

Chad, thoroughly fed up, uttered a tired sigh.

‘Didn’t you see anything back there at the rest home? The horses, those women. “The weavers awake?” “We ride, we ride?” All that?’

‘Look. You have to be careful around people like my friends. They don’t really work the way we do. If you’re not careful you can get sucked into their daydreams. Before you know it you don’t even know if you’re real or not.’

‘Are you saying you didn’t see anything?’

Chad, feet thudding.

‘All I’m saying is that the world is a dangerous place when you see it through their eyes. I know, remember? You should be careful.’

‘Careful. Right, thanks. I’ll bear that in mind next time I nearly get trampled to death by giant armoured women on horseback!’

‘Please don’t be angry.’

‘How can I be anything else? No-one sees what I see. My parents have done a runner, my sister’s turning into some kind of shadow-girl and everyone else seems to dead keen to join in the fun and games!’

A whine filled the space between them. Ellyn, sweeping her metal detector back and forth in slow arcs, marked a deliberate advance across the hard ground.

‘And it’s no good using that thing to avoid the issue!’

‘Metal detectors are not for avoiding.’

Chad, sighing impatiently, shook his head. ‘Whatever game those friends of yours played, it was real to me. I saw nine women on horses come out of those people. Nine beautiful women on horseback glowing like stars, singing about weaving and riding to war. One of them kissed me. My head is full of that kiss and there’s no room for anything else. I doubt I’ll taste or smell or feel anything ever again!’

Chad, scraping a handful of frosty earth from the ground rammed it into his mouth.

‘Cardboard!’

‘Chad, you must-’

‘And their names. That poem they sang. “Sigrún we; Kára and Skögul,” all that. Those names, I know those names. I’ve seen them before.’

‘You have? Where?’

Chad, memory locked on a frog-bound notebook, pages blank under a sky full of stars, bit his lip.

‘Ellyn, those people in there... they’re remembering things they can’t possibly have experienced. What if that’s happening to me too? What if I’m remembering things that haven’t happened to me? Or haven’t happened to me yet?’

‘Chad, the names.’

Her voice, insistent, hooked and clawed at him.

‘ “Kára and Skögul; Mist and Geirahöd.” Come on, it could be important.’

‘Brun’s notebooks, of course!’

Chad, suddenly angry, swung a frustrated punch at a nearby scarecrow, which fell with a clatter.

‘She’s writing a story based on Norse mythology. That’s where I’ve seen the names before.’

‘And that’s where we’re going? To get your sister’s notebooks?’

‘There’s an answer in there I know it. Something that links Brun, her story, the Symphonion. Something that will explain why it’s winter in summer. An answer to the things I’ve seen. An answer to this insanity! If only-’

Chad, foot thumping solidly into the scarecrow’s punctured football head, stopped suddenly, his voice cut off by an irritable whine.

The metal detector.

Reaching down, he pulled the scarecrow upright.

‘Now do you believe something weird’s going on here?’

The scarecrow wore a belted tunic, grey and brown, with slits for arms and legs. The belt was supple leather and the buckle, crudely worked, was heavy metal.

‘This isn’t something you’d dress a scarecrow in. Old clothes maybe, wellies, a football shirt, yes. But this is hand-stitched. And it looks old. More like... Yes, more like something a soldier would wear. A man from the past. A thousand years ago. An Irish soldier defending his lands against invaders from the north!’

Chad, shaking the scarecrow, felt a vibration, as of broken machinery humming far off across a distant horizon. The sound of an army screaming in a language he almost understood rolled, sullen thunder, across the grey fields. His nostrils, clogged with the cold scent of apple blossom. He dropped the bundle of straw and cardboard, stared as the tunic flopped open.

‘Told you!’

Nestled within, a further anachronism.

A dagger, ancient steel, flaked and worked with a celtic design, was shoved through the belt.

Blood darkened the blade.

Chad, standing on creaking knees, held the blade out.

‘Now tell me I’m imagining things.’

‘It’s a knife. So what?’

Chad, watching her face, saw an odd look in her eyes.

‘You recognise it.’

‘I don’t want to talk about it.’

‘Oh I know you don’t. Was there a dagger like this when you found the Ice Man?’

‘Please, Chad, I don’t want to talk about it!’

‘Fine.’

Chad, cutting free a chunk of cloth from the scarecrow, wrapped the dagger and shoved in in his pocket.

When he stood, the daylight seemed to draw in around him, a glowing

fog. Shapeless figures loomed in the distance. Scarecrows. Other soldiers. Figures frozen in the act of war.

'Come on, I'm freezing. The farmhouse is only another mile. We can grab Brun's notebooks and get back to Mrs C's. Maybe find out what's going on here.'

Chad, about to start walking again, stopped when Ellyn bent suddenly, scooping something from the ground and offered it to him. A chunk of wood about the size of a matchbox, castoff from the bundle of twigs and branches which formed the scarecrow's chest.

Chad, puzzled, stared at the wood.

'In case you fall.' Her voice, soft, concerned.

'A scrap of rag won't protect you, will it? Not from something that sharp.'

Chad, rolling his eyes, took the dagger out, unwrapped it. Placing the wood on the ground he plunged the point of the blade into it. The wood stuck fast. Rewrapping the dagger he shoved it back into his pocket.

'Happy now?'

'Ecstatic.'

'Thank the Lord and all the little angels.'

The rest of the walk was uneventful. Chad, leading, steered a path clear of further scarecrows. Ellyn, following, scraped the hard ground with her metal detector, back and forth in lazy, whining arcs. Chad, hypnotised by the sound, placed one foot in front of another, felt a mounting pressure to turn around, go back, run even.

Run from what?

A simple farmhouse which had been their summer home for years?

No. That wasn't it. Chad, shaking his head, marched doggedly on. He knew what was causing the pressure. Not the farmhouse. Something inside.

The Symphonion.

He pictured it sitting on the half-moon living room table, beside the

piano. He remembered it quivering with energy, sucking shape and focus from the room around it; from Chad himself as he reached out to open the lid, to play the silver disk.

The world had opened then, unfolded like an origami model made of X-ray sheets.

Nothing had been the same since.

Now here he was, in a winter field in the middle of summer, with missing parents and a fading sister, pursued by a man made of stars and armoured women on giant horses, through a world that was becoming more and more like some ancient battlefield.

A field on which he had died.

Had died or would die; he could no longer tell the difference.

'Chad.'

Ellyn's voice, a hook to draw him back to the present. And a reminder, of something... something important, something he couldn't quite remember.

'We're here.'

Chad, frowning, dismissed the thought.

He had to focus now. Cut through the flim-flam, the Symphonion's glamour.

Applegate lay ahead, white walls burned out in the pearl daylight like an old photograph, looming above the orchard.

The apple trees, short and thin, seemed to crowd together as they approached, furtive and silent in the cold day. Like soldiers drawing together in ranks to ward off an enemy.

The trees, dark green, almost black, were laden with blossom. The smell of it lay thick on the air.

Blossom – or was it snow?

'I don't like it Chad.'

Ellyn, her voice thin and distant.

‘There’s something weird about those trees. It’s too dark in there. I want to go round.’

Chad, nodding, felt a similar pressure, let it bring him to a stop.

‘It’ll add half a mile on the walk but at least we’ll be on the road and off these fields.’

Angling right, Chad led the way along the orchard fence.

‘I know what you mean.’

Ellen, following, switched off her metal detector.

They walked, single file, in silence that seemed almost to reach out for them. On their left the fence, rough wooden slats treated with old creosote, continued unbroken. Tree branches loomed above, regular columns crowned with dazzling white, a glare that masked impenetrable green-black shadows beneath. The scent of apple blossom drifted thick across the fence and somewhere Chad thought he could hear a heartbreaking melody, like distant bells or melting ice.

‘Shouldn’t we have come to the road by now?’

Her voice, soft, a startling break in the silence.

‘The orchard’s not that big surely?’

Chad, frowning, agreed.

‘You’re right. I don’t remember it being this far round.’

‘Maybe we’ve come the wrong way.’

‘Do you want to turn back, try the other way?’

‘No. We could oscillate all day and get nowhere. Let’s keep going. It’s just an orchard. It can’t last forever.’

‘Unless-’

‘Unless what, Chad?’

-unless time and space were changing; winter tide, ebbing and flowing;

notes in a song and death the singer-

‘Nothing. Forget it. Come on.’

Chad, increasing his pace, marched on. The field unrolled slowly around them, cold furrows hard and bleak in the directionless pearl-grey daylight, thin trees and scarecrows like charcoal stick figures in the distance. Chad, feet thumping against the hard ground, couldn’t escape the thought that they were somehow trapped, sandwiched between the fence and the day; scarecrows versus orchard and either road, forward or back, seemed only to reveal more fence.

‘Surely we should have reached the road by now.’

Her voice, still quiet but showing concern.

‘Or at least the corner of the field.’

He agreed.

They stopped.

‘Boost me up.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Like this. Cup your hands. I’ll stand in them and look over the fence. See if I can work out where we are.’

‘OK.’

‘Good. And take the dagger out of your pocket first. Just in case.’

A moment later the dagger and the metal detector lay side by side a few yards further along the fence. Then with the girl a solid weight in his hands Chad leaned into the fence and struggled to hold firm.

‘What do you see?’

‘I have to get higher.’

Her boot lay alongside his face, the laces pushing into his cheek as she climbed onto his shoulder.

‘How much – you weigh – anyhow?’

‘It’s not polite to ask a lady her weight.’

‘Really – thought that was – her age – ooff!’

Balance gone, they fell together, cartwheel of arms and legs, giggling.

‘Hey that was fun.’

‘For you maybe.’

‘Oh don’t be such a stick in the mud.’

‘What did you see, anyway?’

‘Nothing. The trees are too high.’

‘High?’

Chad, struggling to his feet and pulling her up.

‘They’re just little apple trees. Can’t be more than nine or ten feet. You and me together should add up to more than that. How tall are you anyway?’

‘Five two. But I have lots of growing to do.’

‘Yeah, well I’m five seven. So that gives us nearly a foot over the tallest tree. And the house is two stories plus the roof and chimneys. That’s miles higher. So why can’t we see it?’

‘All I can think is we’ve walked too far. It’s lost in the distance.’

‘Or we are.’

A moment hung between them. Ellyn, bending to retrieve her metal detector, handed Chad the dagger.

Frowning, she nodded.

‘I know what you mean. We do seemed to have walked for ages just around this fence, don’t we?’

‘You know what I think?’

Chad, sitting suddenly.

‘I think something doesn’t want us to reach the house. I think it’s the

same thing that's mucking about with the seasons. Whatever can make winter come in summer can control time. And maybe make trees grow.'

'If I'd said something like that while I was in the rest home I'd never have got out.'

'But now you are out you're as eccentric as you like. Wearing a dufflecoat in summer. All that talk of forces polarising. Carrying a metal detector everywhere you go.'

Her eyes, narrowed, sought his.

'Are you saying I'm responsible for-'

'No, Ellyn, of course not. You're a question mark, it's true but – I'm sure there's an answer to you somewhere. And I don't feel like you're a threat. Not like I did Brun or my parents.'

Ellyn, sitting beside him, drew up her knees and held the metal detector across them.

'What then?'

'The Symphonion obviously.'

'The music box? How can that be a threat?'

'Haven't the foggiest. But you yourself said someone put the end of the world inside it. And when I played the disk I let it out.'

Ellyn, frowning. 'I didn't say that. I haven't told you anything about the music box.'

'Yes you have! Don't you remember? On the Crown. We were watching all that ice in the bay, kids playing snowballs. There were sails on the horizon, nine great square sails. Viking ships, coming across the ice like sleds, pulled by dogs – no, by wolves... don't you remember?'

'I never said it, Chad. I never saw those things.'

A moment passed by.

'Maybe they were part of my vision then. P'raps it was just a dream.'

Chad, laying back, stared up at the sky.

‘It was only yesterday. But it seems – wow, it seems a lifetime ago...’

‘I worry about you, you know.’

Ellyn’s face, edging into his vision like a concerned cloud.

‘We should keep moving.’

‘I know. But somehow it would be easier just to lie here, don’t you think?’

‘Don’t you want those notebooks then?’

‘I do... I really do...’

‘Well then you’d better get up, Chad, named for field of battle. Up now, and face the enemy!’

Ellyn, tuning on her metal detector, waved it over the cloth-wrapped dagger. The whine was shrill and insistent.

‘Up and fight for what you want!’

Chad, stirring, hoisted hmself upright.

‘What was I doing down... ?’

He stood, brushing himself down, shaking his head as if to dispell shadows.

‘Right. This is ridiculous. This orchard cannot go on forever. The laws of physics, geography and land ownership say so and I believe them. I’m going to give it another hundred yards and then I’m going over the fence. Spooky orchard or no spooky orchard, I’m getting to the house and I’m getting those notebooks.’

But they did not need to climb the fence. Fifty yards further on a hedge loomed, near-indistinguishable from the frosty ground. On the other side was the road. Ten more minutes walking brought them to a five barred gate. Beyond it, lay the house.

They stood there for a long moment. Nothing stirred. No bird cried. No fox slipped lazily through the hedgerows. Even the tin cans on the distant scarecrows were silent.

Chad, marching up to the front door, put his key in the lock and shoved.

The door didn't budge.

'What are you waiting for now?'

'The key's stuck or something.'

'Pull it out then.'

'I can't.'

'What do you mean you can't?

'See for yourself!'

The key, half engaged, was stuck fast.

The lock was full of ice.

More ice caked the door frame, rimed the hinges and door knocker.

'We're not getting in that way.'

'Break a window then.'

'Maybe. Let's try the back. There's a trap door for the basement. Maybe that'll open.'

The trapdoor was kept padlocked. But at this time of day the hatch lay in a puddle of sunlight. Weak, true, but enough to make a difference. There was no ice here. Selecting another key from his ring, Chad removed the lock and threw open the trapdoor. It fell back slowly, hit the ground with a clatter.

'Sshh!' Ellyn, her voice harsh in the eerie silence.

'Nervous?'

Chad, peering into the hatch through a curl of steam like breath from throat, saw wooden steps slick with ice leading down into a sea green darkness.

'Breaking and entering... it just seems excessive.'

'This from the girl who burned down her father's house. '

Chad, peering into the gloom.

‘Who bought the rest home she was a patient in by selling a thousand year old corpse. Who wears a dufflecoat in summer and speaks of battles long gone as if they haven’t happened yet-’

Chad, staring into the icy darkness of the basement, stopped suddenly, with one foot over the sill.

‘You know I’m suddenly struck by a thought.’

‘You’re a boy. The odd thought’s not unheard of.’

The joke, forced, was not funny.

‘Mist and Geirahöd.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘I said, “Sigrún we; Kára and Skögul,” You said, “Kára and Skögul; Mist and Geirahöd.” ’

‘Chad, what are you-’

‘The women I saw in the rest home. The ones you said you didn’t see. They sang their names and I heard their song. But if you didn’t see or hear them, how did you know their names?’

Ellyn, saying nothing, looked away.

‘How did you know their names, Ellyn?’

Chapter 22

Chad, waiting for a reply which did not come, sighed impatiently.

‘You know what, I don’t care. I’m going to get Brun’s notebooks now. You do what you like.’

Stepping carefully onto the steps, he descended into the basement. Walls, floor, ceiling, all were caked in ice. Smooth and slippery, blue-green, its translucent depths holding shadows which moved and danced, tiny glimmering points, reflections of the light seeping through the hatch, itself choked with yet more ice.

The air was cold and still.

Chad, listening hard, thought he heard a hint of noise. Shouting? Singing? It sounded very far away.

‘Are you coming or what?’

From the hatch, nothing but a breath of wind.

‘Ellyn!’

A sound then, of someone clambering into the hatch and down the steps. Thud of footfalls, crunch of ice.

‘Don’t shout.’

‘Frightened?’

‘Sound and ice don’t mix. Like water and electricity. Mix them up and things can get dangerous. Ask any mountain climber.’

‘We’re not on a mountain.’

‘No – we’re in a cave. A grotto.’

‘A basement.’

‘Chad, look around. How many basements do you know with stalactites?’

Chad, frowning, looked deeper into the sea-green gloom.

Ellyn, dredging through her pockets, pulled out a small object. There was a click and a beam of light, weak and yellowish, shone forth. The basement was instantly transformed into a hall of mirrors. Distorted reflections slid along every surface, oil on water, flickering ghosts of faces, hands, arms and legs.

‘Never know when you’ll need a torch right?’

Chad, half grinning, half annoyed.

‘Especially in summer.’

‘You’re getting it.’

Her voice, smug.

‘What else have you got in that dufflecoat, anyway? Binoculars? A Geiger counter? A Sherman tank?’

‘Some fluffy peppermint creams, I think.’

Chad, sighing, turned away into the gloom.

‘Brun’s notebooks will be in her room. The basement stairs are over here, I think. They’ll get us up to the hall, at least.’

The space was crowded with irregular, ice covered protrusions. Chad tried to peer into the depths of the ice. Was there perhaps a washing machine and a spin dryer buried under that thick crust? A fridge-freezer? Storage chests? That irregular blob – was it really a bicycle? Those stalactite formations – were they tool shelves? Water pipes?

The ice, prismatic mirror, distorted and hid the truth.

Further into the basement, the ice walls crowded closer together, a constricting throat. Chad turned sideways and slipped through the gap

between two columns, accompanied by his own ghostly, distorted reflection just half an inch away. The ghost-Chad also frowned with concentration as it wriggled through an equally narrow gap.

The ice throat narrowed rapidly. Chad felt his feet slipping as he fought for purchase, any kind of grip to propel himself through the gap. Then he felt hands at his shoulder and hip, pushing hard. Ellyn. With a gasp he popped through the gap into a larger space.

'I'm through. Pass the torch. I'll have a bit of a-'

Chad, turning to face the slit through which he'd emerged, found himself momentarily blinded by torchlight focused through the ice as if through a lens. Shifting sideways to get out of the beam, he slipped on the uneven floor and sat down suddenly.

'Hey – ouch!'

He began to slide.

'Hey!'

Scrabbling for a grip, accelerating into the dark, Chad yelled as he whirled around and down a steep incline. Moments later he hit a shelving wall of ice and, spinning, skidded to a halt.

He blinked and shook his head.

Blackness, everywhere.

Freezing.

'Ellyn?'

Nothing.

'Ellyn!'

Which way had he come from?

'Ell-yn!'

Still nothing.

'Ell-yn!'

A distant voice seemed to echo then, curling around in the icy darkness like smoke in a forest. He couldn't make out words. Was it Ellyn? It seemed deeper somehow. A man's voice. Something made him think of soldiers singing as they marched to war. The melody was hauntingly familiar.

Chad, hand pressed against the ice, felt his way through the slippery gloom. The

(ground)

floor seemed more or less level now, though it was not flat as it would be if the ice coated floorboards. Instead it was bumpy, scalloped and grooved, more like the ground in a cave. Stalagmites, smooth eruptions, swelled to meet descending flows from the curved ceiling. Maybe Ellyn had been right. Chad, shaking his head, huffed impatiently. He was in a basement. Not a cave. A room. No more than twenty feet by fifteen. A fridge-freezer, an old washing machine. A decommissioned bicycle. Shelves of junk. A basement!

As if responding to his determination, light seemed to flicker distantly, lighting the gloom.

'Ellyn?'

Chad, following the light, saw instead a wall of ice. High, curved, translucent. A tunnel made of ice. Slow light seeped through the tunnel walls. Soft, pearl-grey daylight, it came through the walls like water, rippling as he moved. Rippling too when he stopped, hands and face pressed to the wall, struggling to see what lay beyond.

Movement. Shadows. Giants in armour, rippling silhouettes in the ice. Was this what Ellyn had seen when her father's excavation had exposed the Ice Man?

No. There could have been no movement there. Just sea-green stillness and cold.

Chad, listening intently, heard sounds echoing through the ice. Screaming? No.

Singing.

Were the figures he could see dancing?

Chad, shifting position, tried to get a better view. No luck.

But the singing continued, rough voices raised in drunken carouse, and now he could hear music too. Ancient, abrasive... a rough but familiar melody. One he had last heard being played by a music box.

The scent of apple blossom threaded the tunnel.

Chad, pressed against the wall, felt a vibration humming through the ice. Broken machinery far off across a distant horizon. It ran through his arms and cheeks, buzzing in his flesh and bones like electricity.

On the other side of the ice wall, in a space he was beginning to think of as not quite connected with his own reality, Chad saw the figures begin to leap and caper. More light flickered there. Gold and scarlet. A fire? Sunlight?Chad, transfixed, felt a sudden pressure. A static shock crackled across the ice face. He jerked back, face and palms tingling – and in that moment he froze. Disconnected from the wall, he was no longer affected by whatever vibration had blurred his vision. Chad, blinking, suddenly aware his eyes had been slipping out of focus. Not any more. Now he could see perfectly. From this position he could see right through the wall.

Right through the wall and into the living room of the farmhouse.

The ice tunnels seemed to unfold like X-rays. The room beyond filled with electric blue light. A light he had seen only once before, when placing a silver disk onto the Symphonion. A giant stood in the room, framed against the leaded windows. A figure Chad had last seen in a glass case. The Ice Man.

There were other figures too, many more. They filled the room – no, more than filled. Chad, attempting a quick head count, estimated several hundred before he lost count. The entire house couldn't hold that many.

There were sounds too, unaffected now by the buzzing vibration he had been subjected to while pressed against the wall. Voices. Rough, aggressive and exultant, shouting in a language he almost understood. Viking warriors, like the Ice Man, called into existence by the Symphonion, at their head, the giant himself.

No, not the Ice Man. Another. But similar. Fighters in the same war perhaps.

Chad, frowning.

No warrior this. A hunter. But hunting what – or who?

Chad, full of questions but no answers, knew only the music box had made them, sung them into being by draining shape and colour - focus - from the real world and altering it somehow into something new. Wrenching a different, more exotic shape and purpose from the atoms and quanta of his familiar, everyday world.

Forces are polarising.

Ellyn's voice, locked in memory.

He thought, matter and energy are never destroyed – only transformed.

And now he saw a familiar figure move through the crowd. The Grey Man! A crescent of burning colour scarred his cheek and firelight flashed in his hands. No – not firelight, shards of summer sun – amber tears.

Brun's necklace.

And with a sudden click like the sound you get when your ears, blocked from hours of swimming, suddenly pop, Chad realise he wasn't seeing something happening now at all.

Chad, transfixed, and the ice wall a window.

Light from another day, past or future, he could not tell.

As the thought filtered through Chad's head, the Grey Man reached up, up, up and hung the necklace around the giant's neck.

Chad, willing captive, peered closer.

The Grey Man, stepping into the shadow of the giant, was lost, absorbed into the lightless space the giant figure cut in the world.

A sound began to build then. A deep throated roar as of warriors on the eve of battle. The room beyond the ice seemed to recede, to fill with light and shadow, the thunder of voices.

The song of the Symphonion.

The Song of Fenrir.

No longer the sound of distant bells or melting ice. Instead, the full-throated roar of an army, bound by destiny, marching to war at the end of the world.

Chad, startled by the force of the sound, was driven from the wall.

‘Oh!’

Warm arms caught him before he could fall.

‘Ellyn!’

‘Well hello stranger. Where have you been all my life?’

Chad, gasping, suddenly aware how cold the air was in his throat and lungs.

‘How – you – find me?’

Ellyn, setting Chad aside, twirled her metal detector with a cheerleader’s verve, then leaning against it and crossing her legs vaudeville style pushed the torch under her chin and grinned like a Halloween skull.

‘Knew there was a reason I let you keep that old knife.’

Chad, dismissing her humorous overture, turned back to the ice wall.

‘The torch! Give it to me!’

‘OK, OK! A simple thank you would be more than-’

‘Ellyn!’

‘Alright!’

Chad, grabbing the torch, pressed it up against the wall. Threads of yellow light bound the tunnel. Faces hung there, distorted and flickering.

‘No!’

The faces were his own and Ellyn’s.

The Grey Man, the giant, the shouting throng, the room, all had gone.

‘What did you hope to see, Chad? A way out?’

‘I saw – I saw – ‘

‘Chad, calm down.’ Ellyn, rummaging. ‘Here. Have a peppermint cream. I think I’ve got one left.’

Chad, ignoring her outstretched hand, leaned exhausted against the ice wall.

‘You don’t understand. I saw through the ice-’

‘A trick of the light. My torch-’

‘No Ellyn, it wasn’t your torch!’

His voice, shaking.

‘A hall of mirrors. Slippery geography. I saw shadows, shadows and rooms... rooms lit from behind. By real daylight. As if the farmhouse is there somehow, buried in the tunnel walls, murky patches of light and shadow smeared sideways in the ice. As if the tunnels only exist side-by-side with the farmhouse, and the real world is just, I don’t know, wrapped around them somehow, like frosty wallpaper...’

Chad, blinking in the torchlight, fell silent.

Cold ghosts aped him silently, a flickering parody.

A moment passed.

Ellyn, hesitantly, touched his cheek.

‘It’s true, you know. I saw it. The Grey Man. He had Brun’s necklace. He hung it on the giant – the man you found in the ice. He came to life. At any rate, he moved...’

‘This place isn’t good for you.’

Her voice, harsh with concern.

‘We have to leave here.’

‘Not without Brun’s notebooks!’

‘And how are we supposed to find them, stuck under the ice like this?’

‘I don’t know! This ice shouldn’t even be here! These caves shouldn’t even be here!’

His voice, resonating along the ice tunnels, echoes in a forest, waves to her shore.

‘Trust me Chad. Stick with me. The torch is good for a while yet. And the peppermint creams came in useful after all.’

She turned him then, gently, and he saw a trail leading back into the glinting depths. Indentations melted in the walls by a torch bulb, a line of sweets coated in pocket fluff squashed in the holes, sugar beacons, a trail leading off into the gloom.

‘Our way out.’

‘I’m not leaving.’

‘You have to.’

‘No.’

‘You must!’

‘Think about it. We need those notebooks. I need them. It’s the only way to tell if I’m going mad.’

‘Chad, you’re not mad. Take it from one who knows.’

‘But that’s just it, I can’t. There are things here I don’t understand... am I having visions? Maybe I’m delusional. Maybe I’m stuck in the local hospital with a dose of summer ‘flu.’

His voice, harsh with fear, scratched at the silence of the tunnels.

‘Think it over... a temperature of 105... delirium, antibiotics, icebaths... the whole shebang. It’s either that or...’

His hand closing around her arm, gripped hard enough to bruise.

‘Or it’s all real. All of it. The parents, Brun, the Hunter, those women... those women, Ellyn. I know what they were. Mrs C called them weavers. But Brun knew. She wrote it in her notebooks. They were the Valkyr, Ellyn! The Choosers of the Slain! And one of them kissed me!’

His voice, echoing, ghost words in the darkness.

‘If they chose me then I’m going to die. I’m going to die on a field of

battle. Or – or maybe – maybe I already died. Maybe I'm just someone's memory, my sister's memory. A character in a notebook! I don't know! I just don't know! That's why I have to get the notebooks. I have to get them Ellyn. Don't you see? I have to know.''

'Chad-'

'I'm not leaving. I've got to go further in.'

Chad, turning, walked away from the trail of sweets, the girl. Away from the light and into the darkness.

'Wait!'

Her footsteps, behind him, hurrying.

'I'll come with you. Of course I will. We'll get the books.'

Her hand, seeking his.

'We'll get them together.'

'Alright.'

'And then we'll walk out, OK? Out of the farmhouse, the same way I walked out of the rest home. We'll walk out together, OK?'

Chad, saying nothing, moved deeper into the maze of ice.

They walked, hands outstretched, for a time they could not measure, and ghosts walked with them, pale reflections of faces and hands, stick figures moving in a series of frozen images, scarecrows in fog.

'How far do these caves go anyway?'

Chad, impatient, his voice a thread in the gloom.

'I've lived in this town all my life and I've never heard of any caves here. At the coast maybe. But inland? No.'

'There were caves under the town. Your father found them.'

'I know.'

'I don't understand! We should have got somewhere by now.'

‘These caves could go on for miles-’

‘No. They’re not real. We’re still in the farmhouse. I told you. Just... alongside it somehow. And don’t tell me that’s mad because I already know it is!’

‘Chad, look, I know this is important to you but we have to get out of here. We’ve been walking for hours. It could be night already. And we have to get back to town.’

‘You’re right. We have to get out.’

Chad, reaching into his pocket.

‘We have to get out.’

The cloth, the matchbox sized block of wood discarded, Chad attacked the wall with sudden fury.

‘It’s here. The farm is here! The rooms are here I know it! I feel it!’

‘Chad-’

‘Get away from me! Go follow your trail of breadcrumbs if you don’t believe me!’

‘Chad, please-’

‘Ellyn, get out of my way!’

Ice chips flew from the point of the dagger, more caught in his hair, seared his cheeks, his wide- open eyes.

‘Out!’

‘OUT!’

‘NONE OF THIS IS REAL!’

‘Chad, please – the knife – be careful-’

‘Oh I’ll be careful alright! I’ll be careful!’

Chad, hacking at the wall, felt his arms scream with a force like electricity. With every blow a shock slammed through his arms into his chest, into his head, filling him up until he was more scream than boy, a

scream and no breath to give it voice. And the cold tore him, ice chips slashed his skin, and the dagger bit into the wall, deeper and deeper, until-

‘Aauugghh!’

‘Chad!’

The dagger, jammed in the ice, tore free of his hands.

‘No!’

‘Chad-’

‘Turn out the torch.’

‘I-’

‘Turn it out Ellyn!’

A click. They were plunged into darkness.

Not darkness.

Light spilled through the hole the dagger had made in the ice wall.

Chad and all his ghosts, leaning into the hole, worked the dagger free, peered through the gap.

‘Daylight! It’s daylight!’

An hour later the hole was big enough to wriggle through.

Chad, emerging from the icy throat, straightened slowly, every muscle protesting. A moment later Ellyn joined him. Their faces, astonished, gaped silently.

Dusty boxes, sloping rafters. Behind them, a hole broken in the roof tiles dripped ice. Through two skylight windows either side of the ice-framed hole afternoon daylight spread, pearl-grey, flat and featureless.

They were in the farmhouse attic.

Chad, near frantic, lead Ellyn towards the stairs, raced down them to the first floor passage.

‘Typical!’

Chad, pushing open the door to Brun's room, groaned softly.

'Look at this mess. I thought writers were tidy! We'll never find anything.'

'Trust a thief.'

Ellyn, her voice quiet but diamond hard, carved a line in the room, dared him to cross it.

Chad, frowning, framed a silent question.

'Your sister is a writer. She takes history and uses it for her own ends. She's a thief. And it takes a thief to know a thief. Now be quiet and let me think.'

Ellyn, pushing past him into the room, clicked a switch on her metal detector. Chad heard a low hum, like broken machinery humming far off across a distant horizon. The air in the room seemed to vibrate. He found it difficult to see clearly. Images rippled and blured as if seen through a heat haze. He thought, is that the effect of the metal detector, or is it the effect of something responding to the metal detector? Something that wants to stay hidden?

Chad, scowling. 'We're looking for paper. Not old tin cans.'

'We're looking for history. Stolen history.'

Ellyn, moving the metal detector in slow arcs across the room. Carpet, window sill, curtains; a cupboard, a chest of drawers.

'A theft such as this leaves... echoes.'

The metal detector, hovering in a loop across Brun's bed, whined insistently.

'Ah!'

Ellyn, switching the device off, pulled aside the pillows and rolled back first the sheets then the mattress. Under the mattress was a large cardboard box. Ellyn dragged it out.

'It's not metal. How did-'

'Ssshh. Brun's books are precious things. Not everything precious is

made of paper.'

Ellyn, opening the box, withdrew a key. Large, heavy, chased silver. The key to the Symphonion. Chad, taking the key, thrust it into his pocket where it lay beside another, its mirror twin, which had once been a dragonfly.

Chad, dismissing the key, stared back into the box.

Inside lay a treasure trove. Christmas baubles. Smiling snowmen. Painted snowflakes. Fish. Frogs. Deer. Horses. Rainbows in boxes bound with ribbons.

A stack of school exercise books, covered in christmas and birthday paper. A life's work in a cardboard box.

Brun's notebooks.

'Yes!'

Chad, reaching into the box, grabbed the books.

'Finally, some answers.'

But Chad, flipping pages with increasing desperation, finally groaned aloud, casting book after book aside.

'They weren't like this! I know they weren't!'

Every page was blank.

The books were empty.

Chapter 23

‘I don’t get it. She had half a novel here. Research. Characters. Plot. You name it!’

More books joined the pile of the dead.

‘She read some of it to me. “At the place where the world begins, the fjord of the snow-giants, a girl stands with her back against the highest cliff and shields her eyes from the icy glare of the sun.” ’

The words, unremembered for so long, rose now in his mind, a waterfall rainbow, tumbling in mist, half seen.

‘ “Today she will walk the field of battle. Today she will choose the men who will die. One of them will be the man she loves.” She wrote that. My sister wrote that! We were in the garden, just before we heard the ice-cream truck... no, was it an ice cream truck?’

His voice, losing focus, conviction.

‘It was a melody, beautiful, like distant bells or melting ice...’

His eyes, lost in an inner landscape, returned only slowly to the room.

‘Her words... they have to be here.’

Chad, standing bolt upright, face cast in the pale daylight slipping through net curtains, struck by a thought like summer lightning.

‘It takes a thief.’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘ “It takes a thief.” That’s what you said. This has happened to me before. But when? Think! Think! Wait. Yes, I remember now. The other

day. Brun was polishing up the old music box. Wanted me to get her some oil. Teak oil. A favour she said. She didn't want to walk to town. When I came back she lent me something to read. Part of her story. A notebook, bound in frogs. This notebook!'

Chad, reaching for the pile of dead books, grabbed one and flapped it around.

'I fell asleep reading it. I had the strangest dream. Of winter in summer, constellations coming to life. The world wasn't solid anymore but clear like... oh, like an origami model made of X-ray sheets, and I could see all through it! Everywhere and everything and everyone, all at the same time. All in the same place. And... in the morning... I wanted to finish the story but... the notebook was empty. Every page blank. Like new snow and no prints to see. The words had gone. But you know what?'

'Chad, I really think we should-'

'When I went downstairs, the Symphonion was all polished and shiny again. Somehow more there than it had been. More sharp, more in focus. You know what I think? I think that box is stealing Brun's story. Bringing itself and the story to life somehow. Yes... yes. She steals history, it steals her story, and makes history... the same way a carpenter makes a box or an engineer a machine... it fits, you see?'

Chad, eyes and mind wide open. His words now a ferocious cascade, free-association beyond control.

'A perfect circle. It's making history. Or no – it's making his story... The Hunter, the Warrior. And we're all playing parts. You, me, Brun, Vincent. But which parts... yes, that's the question... which parts? Are we heroes or villains? Are we even real anymore?'

'Chad, we have to leave now. It'll be dark soon. We have to get back to your sister. Back to Mrs C's.'

'Mrs. C! She was coming here. To get the Symphonion. Because I wouldn't.'

Chad, tapping his forehead with a crooked finger.

'My fault of course. I was scared. I knew what was happening here. Some part of me knew, I mean. Now we have to warn her! Or she'll be

trapped here, just the same as we-'

'No. I don't think so. We broke that trap, if it was a trap. I don't think it will work for anyone else now.'

'That's a leap of faith. Anyway, what about other traps?'

'Look, Chad. You said yourself there's a pressure here. Some kind of power. You're right, I can feel it too. There's nothing in the notebooks, and that's what we came for. Now we have to go.'

'But... how will I know if I'm right? Without Brun's words how will I ever know?'

Chad, voice a tiny thread in the frozen stillness of the room, leaned his head against the window, felt the net curtain press against his skin, indenting it. The cold glass steamed up as he breathed, turning the world outside into a grey fog. Lifting his hand he brushed aside the curtain and pulled a finger through the moisture. An arc of colour below two dots. A smiling face.

Chad, mind caught on the image of a Grey Man scarred with a line of colour, jerked suddenly backwards.

'That's it!'

Through the rippling face, running with moisture, a moment of perfect clarity: an apple orchard blooming pink-white, soldier ranks marching in endless aisles past a garden shed, a parked petrol-driven motormower, a wooden pub table. The very pub table where only days before Brun had taken a tin of oil and given him part of her story to read in exchange.

On the table, a rectangle of colour. Cheery orange cats grinning out from a dark green background, dusted with apple blossom or snow.

Another notebook.

Chad, reaching for the notebook, separated from it by damp glass, a flimsy net curtain and two hundred yards of garden.

Turning, he pushed past Ellyn and ran from the room.

The garden was bright but cold, pearl-grey daylight fresh and clean-smelling after the airless, grubby interior of the farmhouse. Chad, more

storm than boy, charged the kitchen door, took the rail fence bordering the garden like an olympic hurdler and thundered into the orchard.

The moment he left the garden, the freshness of the day changed. Under the trees it was dark, almost sepulchral. Thin beams of pale sunlight penetrated the gloom, cotton threads in the vaulted green. And there was a pressure here. As if the air itself were ranged against him. For Chad, running full tilt, it was like hitting a wall. Head down and shoulders set he shook off the feeling, pushed on through.

He ran, long grass tugging at his shoes, branches scratching his hands and face. He ran, total focus and no thought of safety, arms brushing aside trees as if they were made of mist, shoulders banging branches, ignoring the fall of fruit or blossom, the angry cries of disturbed birds.

The further into the orchard he pushed, the colder it became. Soon the grass was rimed with frost, thick and crackling underfoot, and the branches held icicles that broke with a sound like glass bells when he shoved past them.

Chad, storm-boy, force of nature, slammed through it all, uncaring, one thought uppermost in his mind.

Orange cats grinning blindly from a school notebook.

The cold deepened. The last time he had come here the blossom had seemed like snow. Now it felt like snow, ice-cold and sticky, and it shook loose from the trees as he blew past, whirlwind boy cutting a hole in the day, sticking to his hair and face, shoulders and hands.

He ran, uncaring, or caring too deeply.

Trees, shed, table, book. A familiar route.

At its end, the pot of gold at the end of winter's rainbow.

'Ellyn! Look! It's still here! The book she was writing in!'

Chad, motionless, suddenly frozen in time reaching for the book. Snow (or was it really blossom after all?) impelled by its own inertia, shaking loose from head and shoulders and arms to hang, shimmering folds in the air, tumbling lazily like mist at the foot of a waterfall.

'It's here.'

Chad, reaching for the notebook.

Ellyn, beside him, said nothing.

‘The answer. It’s here. I can feel it. I can feel her words.’

Chad, touching wood, then paper, felt a current run through the orchard. Static crackled at his fingertips. Blossom, propelled by charged electrons, now moved as if with purpose. Except it wasn’t blossom after all but snow, just as he’d first thought. Flakes of ice, cold-tempered and razor sharp slashed at his hands and face.

‘It’s mine! I found it! You can’t keep it from me!’

Chad, head back, eyes tight shut, howling into the sky; and more – at something beyond the day, something vast and powerful, something that had scooped him into its maw and swallowed him whole and which, even now, was changing him into something he did not understand or want to be.

He thought, is that all I am to the Symphonion? Fuel lighting the way to a different tomorrow?

‘Do you hear me? I won’t let you have it!’

At his voice, a blizzard shot through with pale rainbows, exploded into the air. Trees, shed, table, girl; all were lost to view. No spindrift this but a full blizzard, and through it Chad groped blindly for the book, following the lines of force, pushing where he found resistance, ignoring the crackling shocks rippling along his fingers, hands, arms; the lightning arcing in searing threads between his hands and the book, the table, the shed, the trees.

‘I need it!’

Lightning, striking the shed, drew a crooked thread of glass through earth, wood, brick, metal. Thousands of degrees of heat. For a heartbeat the ground boiled hotter than the sun.

Chad, screaming from an orange grin, defied the moment.

A heartbeat of crushing pressure and the notebook was held firm in his grasp, orange cats still grinning, mindless smiles as wide as the day, breathing out the storm.

‘Thought you could hide it from me, didn’t you!’

His voice a howl, like distant wolves.

In answer, a moment of calm.

‘Didn’t you!’

The motormower parked beside the shed exploded.

Metal shards blasted out in every direction, cutting through snow, tree, table.

Chad, eye of the storm, driven screaming to his knees, clutching the notebook to his chest as if it was his long-lost heart’s desire, only laughed.

‘Can’t destroy me without destroying the notebook, can you? And you need her words just as much as me, am I right? Well too bad buster! It’s mine now and I’ll open it if I please! Read aloud the words you want so much! Learn all your little secrets! That’ll take the shine off your little joke, won’t it?’

The fire, like an animal, screeched as it fought the snow.

‘THAT’LL TAKE THE SHINE RIGHT OFF!’

With the capricious abruptness of a Kansas twister, the pressure in the orchard snapped and was gone. Fuel exhausted, the fire subsided to a bubbling hiss and was extinguished, buried in snow. Tree branches pushed aside by the blast sprang back into place with a series of sharp cracks like rifle shots. Blossom – no, sleet, stinging chips of ice, hit the ground with sudden finality. A rainstick rattle, scattering to silence.

The orchard settled.

The storm was over.

Chad, blinking away the lightning, was just a boy again.

Shaking, he peeled the notebook from his chest.

He looked at it and laughed, then collapsed stiffly to a sitting position on

the steaming grass.

‘Shall-’

Chad, head down, fighting for breath.

‘Shall I – open – it?’

Ellyn, watching silently from nearby trees, said nothing.

‘I don’t know if I could bear it if-’

A wheezing breath.

‘-this one was blank too.’

Chad, panting, hunkered in the grass as heat from the fire subsided, and stillness returned to the orchard. He thought, did any of that really happen?

Another question requiring an answer.

One only Brun’s notebook could give.

Chad, acutely aware of every fibre of the paper binding the book he held, shaking as he held it up in the dim remaining daylight. His fingers, overcoming a reluctant inertia, finally moved. Cat-grins opened and closed as the cover creased. Pages, like an old door or a ship’s timbers in a heavy wind, creaked as the book fell open. Chad, staring almost in terror, saw ruled lines filled with neat longhand.

‘ “Notes for a novel by Brun Jordan.” ’

Chad, reading aloud from the title page, voice a trembling thread among the trees.

‘It’s the first book, Ellyn. Brun’s first notebook. The most important one! It must have been out here all this time.’

Chad, hugging the book shut against his chest, choked by a deepening smile.

‘The orchard wasn’t protecting the house. It wasn’t keeping us from the house. It was trying to keep us from the notebook!’

Chad, jerking upright, paced the length of the pub-table, feet crunching snow-drenched grass.

‘Not getting to the end of the fence, the ice-caves under the house, the storm in the orchard, it was all a distraction. All supposed – designed – to keep us from this. But why?’

‘Chad, you’ve got what you came for. Maybe we should think about getting back to-’

‘Of course we can go. Why not? But I meant what I said, Ellyn. I’m going to get to the bottom of this.’

Chad, turning, marched stiffly away from the table, from shed and farmhouse, a ruler straight line through the wet grass. And it seemed to him little more than a few moments walk to the edge of the fields, as if the orchard was anxious to let them go now it had failed to keep them from the book. The fence, once so high he’d had to boost Ellyn up to see over it, now barely topped his elbow.

‘It’s letting us go.’

‘The orchard – or the house?’

‘The Symphonion.’

Chad, vaulting the fence, marched away into the fields. He looked back neither to see if Ellyn was following, nor check if some stray spark of fire had migrated from shed to trees. Instead words jerked out of him, leaves blown sharply before a gathering wind.

‘You know what? There’s something wrong. This is too easy. The Symphonion needs that book. First and last words. The mind behind the madness. Brun’s original idea. Whatever song it’s singing, whatever yarn it’s spinning, the words in here-’

Chad, tapping the notebook against his hip for emphasis, did not break stride.

‘-are the most important words of all.’

Snow fell, underscoring his words. Thick grey flakes, swirling pieces of sky, filling the air and darkening it. The day, already pale, dimmed even further as they walked. Now the fields seemed to recede into a blank haze peopled by distant ghostly shadows. Bushes, trees. Scarecrows.

‘Fog coming down.’

Ellyn, her voice steady, the calm centre of the storm.

‘That’s it then. The new trap. It wants us to get lost. Freeze to death in the cold.’

‘It’s just a music box. It can’t think.’

Chad, striding sure footed across the rutted field, merely chuckled.

‘Interesting isn’t it?’

Chad, casting a quick look back over his shoulder.

‘We seem to have undergone a little role-reversal, you and I. Now you’re the sceptic and I’m the one spouting oddities by the baker’s dozen. I don’t have the gift of words my sister does but how about trying this on for size? Why isn’t your breath steaming, Ellyn? Mine did, back in Brun’s room. I breathed on the window and it misted up. It’s even colder now, wouldn’t you say? But you... well, you feel warm enough. On the outside. But it’s the inside that warms our breath. What are you like on the inside, Ellyn?’

Ellyn, moving swiftly forward to draw level with him.

‘You haven’t changed Chad. You’re having a perfectly normal reaction to a strange day. Or at least what seems to you like a strange day.’

Her voice, a dark thread in the fog-blind day.

‘I could be honest and say that sometimes my little eccentricities can be... well not an act so much as a shell. But my feelings for you are real. Because you are real, Chad. Oh I walked out of that rest home on my own, there’s no getting away from that. But you reached out to me in a way no-one else could. You touch me Chad. There’s contact between us. Friction. There’s a force here, you’re right. Something unnatural – or maybe something natural that’s got out of control – yes, that sounds more like it. Like a broken power line, arcing in the night. You and me, we’re the ends of that arc. The terminals. Without us – no arc.’

‘Forces are polarising.’

‘Exactly!’

‘Like the Aurora Borealis.’

‘Yes!’

‘Or like magnetic poles.’

‘Yes!’

‘Ellyn, did you see the lawnmower explode?’

‘Why can’t you trust me?’

Ellyn, sighing.

‘I trust you, Ellyn.’

Chad, walking again.

‘I trust you the way an engineer trusts a circuit diagram. Except-’

More steps, holes crunched in deepening snow.

‘Except with you it’s a bit like the diagram has got some bits missing – or no, some mistakes. A resistor instead of a thyristor, capacitance instead of inductance. All the little colour coding bands mixed up together so that everything turns white. Oh, a good enough engineer could build the machine. And it might even work. But it wouldn’t do what it said on the box, would it?’

Silence.

Footsteps in snow.

Somewhere a crow uttered an eerie, fog bound complaint.

‘Of course it wouldn’t. How could it? And like it or not that’s you, Ellyn. At this point, right now, it’s everyone I know. You all look like the real thing but the way you’re put together... only the Symphonion knows what the end result will be. And what am I left with? A machine made of fog and snow. I can’t touch it, I can’t find the off switch, and I don’t know what its function is.’

The crow cried again, harsh voice softened by distance, the sound rising and falling around them like waves before fading into the ever-thickening fog.

‘All I know is that it scares me.’

She sighed.

‘If only you knew how much the world scares me.’

‘If I knew would it help?’

‘If you knew the function of the machine, would that help?’

Chad, walking, said nothing. A touch at his shoulder made him turn. Her face was close, framed by the furry edge of her dufflecoat hood, a dark blob set against an eerie moiré of shifting white.

‘Chad?’

‘Your breath is steaming now.’

His voice, flat and cold as the day.

‘The machine is capable of making running adjustments.’

Ellyn, moving closer, her breath hot on his cheek.

He felt moisture there. Melting snowflakes?

‘Don’t cry, Chad. The battle is always hard fought. But to the victor, the spoils.’

Her lips, brushing his, clung briefly, a promise of summer, then parted, slowly.

One or two thick flakes of snow swirled between them, forcing him to pull focus, breaking the moment.

Chad, turning away, felt only fear.

The chill against his face felt even colder now.

Chapter 24

‘I don’t remember seeing them this close to the orchard.’

Chad, musing, marched on into the endless half-light. Rutted fields, hedges, trees; grey nested within grey; Russian dolls, and their patterns bled of colour, texture, warmth. Behind them, a darker grey line topped by cloudy tree-shapes marked the fence at the edge of the orchard, receding into the mist. To each side, flanking indistinct horizons, charcoal figures scratched onto the day.

‘Counting scarecrows now?’

Ellyn, her voice, soft and yet somehow still sharp in a world inevitably losing focus.

‘With dreams like mine, it’s better than counting sheep.’

‘How many have you seen?’

Ellyn, wiping moisture from her glasses, peered into the haze.

‘I don’t know. Every time I try to count them I get a different number. But they’re all right at the edges of the field. That’s an odd place to put them don’t you think? So far from a crop? And anyway I’m sure there weren’t as many on the way here.’

Ellyn, replacing her glasses, followed Chad’s pointing finger.

‘Are you sure they’re not trees? I can’t really tell from here. But they look all twisty. And aren’t they moving? Yes I’m sure that one’s moving. Like branches swaying in the wind.’

‘There’s no wind, Ellyn.’

A moment. Fog swirling. Somewhere a crow screamed.

‘If there were the fog would lift. But it’s getting thicker. At least it seems like it’s getting thicker. Don’t you think it is?’

‘Oh I don’t know. Anyway. Maybe the movement I saw was birds. Ravens or something. I thought I heard a crow just now.’

‘Birds? Roosting on the scarecrows? That would sort of defeat the object wouldn’t it?’

Chad, head down, kept marching across the uneven ground.

‘Birds aren’t stupid, Chad.’

‘I know.’

‘Especially Crows.’

‘I know.’

This seemed to end the conversation, and they walked in silence for a while. Chad, scanning the gradually bleaching day, felt a peculiar sensation begin to creep through his body. Something more than just a feeling of cold and tiredness. A tingling sensation, like static electricity. Every so often the distant cry of a bird would ululate through the fog, spiralling closer and then warping away again. The restless sound made him think of a shuttle weaving thread in a loom. And no matter how far they walked the scent of apple blossom was thick in the air, as if the orchard were still only a few paces behind.

‘How far have we walked do you suppose?’

‘Quarter of a mile? Half, maybe. Why?’

‘How far is it to town from here?’

‘A mile. Maybe a mile and a half if you go by the road. Why?’

‘I can still smell apple blossom.’

‘It is summer, Chad.’

Chad, deftly catching a single fat flake of snow on a fingertip, held out his hand so she could watch the crystals melt.

‘Tell that to the marines.’

‘Only if you’re too busy with the scarecrows.’

‘Talking of which-’

Chad, hesitating, licked snow from the tip of his finger.

‘Go on.’

‘They always seem to be the same distance away, have you noticed? No matter how far we walk. As if they’re pacing us.’

Chad, frowning, raked the softening horizon.

‘I noticed one about five minutes ago near an oak tree. We left the tree behind a while ago but the scarecrow is still there, a few hundred yards off to our right.’

‘Are you sure it’s the same scarecrow?’

‘Yes. I noticed the arm was bent, as if it were beckoning, or waving to someone.’

Chill tendrils of fog swirled between them.

‘And it’s especially odd when you consider the fog’s getting thicker all the time. They should be fading into the mist, shouldn’t they? But it’s as if they’re coming closer with the fog, always staying just at the edge of vision.’

‘I don’t like it, Chad.’

Ellyn, breathless, feet near-silent on the hardening ground.

‘All this talk of scarecrows moving by themselves. It’s making me feel weird.’

‘This from the girl who spent a year in a looneybin – ow! Don’t punch me!’

‘Just a reminder that tact isn’t your strong suit.’

‘Well, gosh, thanks Ellyn.’

‘Sarcasm isn’t your strong suit either. Why don’t you apply a little

logic?'

'You want me to think rationally now? Alright. Scarecrows can't move. Can't get up and walk around. They're just sticks and old rope and footballs for heads. It's our imaginations. We're scaring ourselves in the fog.'

'It's not just that.'

Ellyn, frowning.

'Of course it isn't.'

Chad, taking a firmer grip on the notebook he held, began to walk faster.

'Ellyn, we found a scarecrow dressed as an Irish soldier, carrying a bloodstained dagger. Do you remember that?''

His words, sliding around them in the fog.

'The road is somewhere to our left.'

Her voice, a shivering thread in the cold.

'Do you remember?'

Chad, voice cold as snow, pushing like ice.

'Yes I remember!'

Ellyn, heat to his cold, equally determined.

'The road must be to our left if we came out of the back of the orchard. I want to head that way. I want to walk on the road. The going will be easier. Maybe there'll be a bus.'

'I don't know if the road is such a good idea.'

Chad, remembering a fog made of apple blossom, being lost between seats on an impossibly large upper deck, found his pace faltering.

'I didn't much like the last bus ride you took me on.'

'Well I think it's a good idea.'

'Oh do you?'

‘Yes I do!’

‘Well go and walk on it then!’

‘Chad, stop shouting! I don’t want to split up. I want to walk on the road and I don’t want to argue about it.’

‘What’s this then if it’s not an argument? Scotch mist?’

‘Alright! Alright...’

Her voice, breaking, and him the shore.

‘Alright. You wanted me to be honest, and I will be. It’s just hard that’s all. I told you – you got through my defenses – somehow. And I’m scared.’

‘I scare you?’

‘Typical boy. It’s always got to be about you.’

Footsteps, crunching in snow.

‘You’re not what scares me.’

Fog, swirling, coiled slowly around them.

‘What then?’

Silence. Snow swirling.

‘Ellyn.’

‘Alright!’

Her voice, shivering. Cold or fear, he couldn’t tell.

‘Look, Chad, ever since I walked out of the home... since the doctors said I was well again... I’ve felt really odd... as if the life I’m living is, well, like a shadow that’s fallen over the real world. Nothing seems to have any substance or... Nothing seems important, somehow. Or, no – that’s not it. I mean those words aren’t big enough, exactly... Oh, I’m not saying this right.’

Chad, head skewed, leaned into her words.

‘That’s why you burned down your dad’s place.’

‘I don’t know. I don’t know if there is a reason I did that. I just remember watching the bricks and wood go up, the glass explode... I just remember how hot it was, how my skin... screamed. And just for a while everything seemed real again. Real like the stars I’d seen; the people made of stars I saw when I nearly died. I felt safe. But then the firemen came with their big pumps and the feeling went away.’

Chad, walking, said nothing.

‘I stayed in a B&B for a while. There was someone I talked to. You know, a therapist. We talked about dad. About my time in the home. It helped a bit. Not much. The days just dragged by, endlessly grey and unreal. Like fog I suppose. And I began to get frightened. Maybe I wasn’t well at all. Maybe I’d had a good couple of weeks or months and they’d let me out and now I was just slipping back to what I’d been like before. Some kind of psycho delinquent with a penchant for petrol and the hots for matches. It was like that for a long time, Chad. A long time. Then you came. And, I don’t know, you reached me, somehow. Climbed the fence I put up.’

‘I didn’t really do anything you know-’

‘You were you! That’s all you had to do. Maybe I took the fence down myself. Maybe I burned the fence. If I did you’re the reason. Anyway it’s down now and there’s nothing between me and the world. Nothing to keep me safe.’

Fog, swirling.

Footsteps crunched in snow.

‘I see the things you see, Chad. Trying to get around the orchard when the fence seemed to go on forever, those caves full of impossible ice, the lightning storm or whatever it was that happened when you picked up the notebook... they were real. I know it. So were the women in the rest home. I saw them, Chad. Those beautiful giants on horses. The Valkyr. I heard their song. I know their names. They’re real to me. Real in a way the everyday world hasn’t been for a long time. Maybe it’s because they’re real to you that they’re real to me, I don’t know. I watched one kiss you and... I was jealous.’

Her words, steamy breath, mingled with the cold air.

Her finger, moving, drew a pattern in the fog.

Chad, waiting, said nothing.

‘You make me feel... not safe, exactly... more solid. More here. As if I matter. As if I’m real again. You’re right, Chad. Something really strange is happening. It has been for some while. It’s changing us.’

Footsteps, crunching.

‘Time is of the essence. I don’t know why I think that but I do. Out here we could get lost in the fog and wander for hours. The road is more sensible. And besides... walking across the fields feels... I don’t know... odd to me. Off-kilter, somehow. Don’t you feel it too? As if... and I know this sounds crazy but... as if when we walk... we’re not just moving in space.’

Chad, glancing sideways, stopped abruptly.

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

Her eyes, raking his, an undeniable connection.

‘Time has direction, Chad.’

Her voice, a dream-like thread in the fog.

‘Every moment that passes is a step on the path of time.’

Chad, frowning, pinched the bridge of his nose.

‘What you said about the way I make you feel... As if I make you feel more solid, more here, more real. That’s what I think about the Symphonion.’

‘There’s a connection between us Chad, just as there is between Brun and the music box. Don’t tell me it’s not true. Don’t tell me you don’t feel it.’

Chad, head rocking, slow agreement.

‘Yes I feel it, of course I do. And you’re right about another thing too. Walking through these fields... it’s like we’ve stepped off the path. And time’s lost its way. As if wherever we go... time could be different there. And we could be lost in time, forever.’

Chad, shivering, wrapped his arms around himself for warmth.

'It's cold. We need to find the road.'

A moment passed, fog and snow.

'Alright. Let's go forward until we come to the hedge bordering this field and then we'll follow it left. That will put the sun, such as it is, at our backs. When we hit the corner of the field we'll turn left again. Then we just keep walking in a straight line until we hit the road that runs past the front of the farmhouse. From there it's plain sailing all the way to town. Suit you?'

Ellyn, nodding agreement, began to walk.

'How far do you suppose we are from the hedge?'

'Can't be far.'

'Why don't we just turn left now?'

'Because in the fog we won't know which hedge we've come to. You said yourself we could easily get lost out here. I'm fairly sure I don't want that, do you?'

'No.'

But five minutes walk produced nothing except rutted field, frozen hard and stunted growth pushing stubbornly out of the thickening snow that crunched underfoot.

'We're not having much luck are we?'

'Let's just give it a few minutes more. The hedge has to be there. I've walked along it loads of times.'

'I've got another idea. You said you saw an oak tree a while back. That must be the storm oak in the middle of the south field. Lightning struck there years ago. It has a broken branch I know points south-east because I used to play there when I was a kid. If we can retrace our steps, find the tree, the branch will be pointing towards the road.'

'Do you really want to go back?'

'If it's the quickest way to the road.'

‘I’m not sure I like the idea of going back towards the farmhouse.’

‘Really? Or is it the thought that there was a scarecrow by the tree that’s putting you off? A scarecrow you thought was following us.’

‘Look, let’s split the difference. You want to go back then left, I want to go forward then left. We both agree on left, so let’s just go left now. Whatever hedge we come to, we’ll just follow it left. We’ll have to come to the road eventually.’

Turning, they began to walk. With the sun a pale spectre at their backs the day seemed to brighten slightly but it was a brightness which brought no clarity. Just a further deepening of the fog closing in around them, and pearl reflections from the swirling snowflakes which made them squint.

‘Too bad we don’t have sunglasses.’

‘Who’d ever have thought we’d need them in this fog.’

A sound came to them then, softened by distance.

‘Do you hear that? That’s the wind moving branches.’

Chad, squinting against the blank horizon, raised a hand to shield his eyes.

‘Is that the hedge in front of us?’

‘I don’t know. I can’t see.’

A few steps brought them close enough for a proper view.

‘It’s a scarecrow.’

The noise of it came to them then, finally clear, stones in tin cans rattling softly like old bones, drifting through the fog.

‘Chad, where are you going?’

‘Those things weird me out. I’m going around it.’

‘If we go around we won’t be able to pick up our direction again. We’ll have to walk straight past and be done with it.’

Chad, steps faltering, slowed to a stop.

‘Look, we’re going to pass well to the right of it. Here. Take my hand and stay on my right. It’ll be fine.’

Her hand in his, Ellyn began to walk.

‘Careful. You’re going too close.’

‘It’s your imagination. I’m walking in a dead straight line.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I’m following the ruts in the field.’

‘Oh.’

Out of the mist it came, a figure of charcoal scratches. To the sound of rattling stones was added flapping cloth, and a brittle scraping. Bundles of branches bound in cord, stick limbs, wind driven. The head, nodded back and forth, eyes mottled black and white sports hexagons above a broken-valve nose, its voice an empty plastic knocking.

‘Ellyn, too close!’

‘I told you I’m walking in a straight line.’

‘But we’re walking towards it!’

‘I tell you-’

‘Ellyn, stop will you? Please.’

‘Alright.’

Ellyn, sighing, came to a halt.

His hand, in hers, a burning grip.

‘It’s too close. See?’

‘It’s your imagination. We walked in a straight line.’

‘Then it moved.’

‘It can’t move. It’s a scarecrow.’

‘It’s got a tunic on. Like the other one we saw.’

‘So maybe they had a job lot. Some local fancy dress clearout.’

‘And the dagger? The blood?’

‘Old junk. And maybe it wasn’t blood. Just rust or something. Come on. We have to keep going.’

‘I want to go around!’

‘Chad, we’ll lose our way-’

‘I’m serious, Ellyn. I want to go around.’

‘Alright! Alright!’

Bearing right, they struck off again. Only a moment passed this time before Chad stopped again.

‘I can still see it.’

‘So?’

‘It should have disappeared into the fog by now.’

‘It’s not moving, Chad.’

‘How come we can still see it then? And look – its arm has changed position. As if it were waving – or signalling.’

‘Signalling to who?’

‘The others of course. The other scarecrows.’

Chad, tugging hard, struck off further to the right.

‘Chad, wait-’

‘It’s still in front of us! It’s closer!’

‘Alright. Hang on. Stop for a minute. We must have got turned around somehow. If you’ll just calm down-’

‘Alright. I’m sorry. But look. We started with the sun at our backs and the scarecrow in front of us. Now the sun is on our right and the scarecrow is still in front of us. Tell me that makes sense.’

‘Well...’

‘And the ruts in the field. We started off walking parallel to them. Now we’re walking across them.’

‘I don’t see how you can tell in all this snow-’

‘The snow – that’s it! There’s no snow on it!’

‘Look, Chad if you could just-’

‘Ellyn, think about it! Anything that wasn’t moving would be covered in snow. So why isn’t there any on that scarecrow?’

‘-calm down and let’s-

‘Ellyn I’m trying to stay calm, but look. There’s no snow. And its arm is in a different position now. Its holding something.’

‘I don’t-’

‘Just look, please!’

‘Alright, I’ll look, but I think you’re-’

Her voice, faltering suddenly in the cold.

‘You see. I’m right!’

‘Alright, yes. It does look like its moved. And I don’t remember it holding something. But I don’t really remember it not holding something either. And if the wind is moving it then the snow could have fallen-’

‘It’s a dagger. There’s no snow and it’s holding a dagger. Every time I look at it it’s closer to us and it’s holding a dagger. We have to go now. Ellyn. We have to go!’

Chad, tugging her hand, began a slow run to the right, away from the figure scratched into the dirty white afternoon.

Feet stamping holes in the snow. Breath hanging in clouds. Chest tight, heart panic driven.

Chad, running, nostrils clogged with the scent of apple blossom.

Somewhere a crow screamed. Its voice, fog-softened, a bittersweet melody like distant bells or melting ice.

‘Chad, Chad, calm down. It’s gone now. We’ve left it behind.’

Chad, heart a hammer and his chest the anvil, pressed on into the thickening snow.

‘Chad wait! Chad!’

Her voice, falling behind, mixing with the fog.

Something exploded in him then, a static shock and him the cable, energy arcing through his head, golden fire to cut the fading, grimy day.

They came out of the snow, branch-bundled limbs like charcoal claw-scratches, thorn-hands bursting from the fog as if from a hole in the world, reaching out to clutch and hold and never let go.

‘Ellyn!’

‘I’m here!’

‘I can’t see you! Where are you?’

Chad, swerving, jagged left, turned an ankle on a frozen rut, fell, clawed his way upright and stumbled on.

Figures loomed from the mist; arms reaching, fingers spread like claws; plastic heads splotched with

(blood)

mud and

(they’re covered in)

snow-streaked hair framing grimy faces, no scarecrows these but soldiers, men of Ireland dressed in bloody rags and screams wielding daggers that whined as they tore air and flesh like kite strings slashing colour from the day.

Chad, screaming too, ran with them, from them, and as he ran the snow thickened, blocking the daylight until all he could see was glimpsed through flickering static like a badly tuned television.

Men fighting, falling, screaming, dying.

Steel splashed with blood.

Two armies smashed together under a sullen sky.

White snow made red.

Chad, clawing flakes from his hair and eyes saw men staggering under the weight of snow, men transformed into snow-men, blood and grime and screams all frost-bleached, their movement pulsing, a broken machine, swords dripping scarlet icicles, wading through snow to their knees, their bodies bulking with snow like muscle, their heads crowned with snow, their eyes flashing ice-blue fire like a sky full of stars.

Chad, stumbling, driven to his knees, and the screams around him deepening as the army's throat was choked with snow, deepening, thickening until it was not men that gave voice but the land itself, humped hills of snow smashing at each other with limbs of ice like avalanches, and through all the wind howling like wolves and endless snow driving everything to white.

'Baldur!'

Chad, snow-blind, summoned by a voice he knew.

'Brun!'

Not his sister. No girl but a woman, beautiful and terrible, riding a night-black horse through the ice-white day. A giantess, armoured in leather and stars, leaning to scoop him from the snow as if he were no more a child than a child's toy. Freya. Goddess of love and war. Leader of the Valkyr.

'Baldur my love. It is time.'

Her lips, pressed to his, a heat to drive away the day.

She will choose you and none shall weep.

'Baldur my love-'

'CHAD! CHAD WHERE ARE YOU! CHAD!'

Ellyn, her voice driving away the vision.

Again he felt the heat of a touch, a hand lifting him from the snow.

'Chad, thanks heavens, I thought I'd lost you.'

‘I – must have – fallen-’

‘You ran off so suddenly. You must have tripped over something in the snow. Here. What’s this?’

Hands, scraping snow from a pile on the ground.

‘The other scarecrow. The one you kicked over before we reached the farmhouse. The one where you found the dagger.’

But it wasn’t a scarecrow.

Chad, joining her on hands and knees to scrape snow, cried out suddenly.

The face, no plastic ball but flesh and bone and snow-plastered hair. The eyes open, staring in death.

‘Chad!’

‘It’s a soldier. Ellyn, it’s a dead soldier!’

His voice, a hand to move a curtain. Snow and fog pushed aside to reveal a glimpse of hell. A world, frosted bone white, blotched with carmine-stained hummocks. Dead soldiers, ranked to every horizon, gaping eyes and clutching hands pushing motionless from a thousand snowy tombs.

‘This is it. The Battle of Clontarf. Their last stand. The Irish against the Vikings.’

Chad, eyes locked on a once-distant battlefield, saw faces stained with blood and screams, melting into the snow.

‘This is where it all changed for them. Where history wrote them out.’

Chad, shivering, gripped Brun’s rolled notebook hard.

‘They fought the Northmen and lost.’

His thumb, smearing ink, rubbed the titled cover raw.

‘Blank page.’

The title, gone from the notebook, rubbed away as fog and snow, a falling curtain, swept back to conceal the fate of the last true Irish King,

and nothing was left but a blank page, ink-smeared history.

‘Chad-’

He stood, icy pinnacle in the warm breath of her voice.

‘The road is that way Chad. I saw the hedge when the fog lifted. We have to go.’

Chapter 25

An hour later, as evening darkened the fog and snow, they crunched up the drive to Mrs C's house. There were no lights in the main building. All was silent, eerie and cold. Hunched bushes, shivering, scattered snow from naked branches as they passed.

Chad, shivering too, stamped his feet.

'Poor boy.'

Ellyn, her voice a warm breath in the cold.

'You want to borrow my scarf?'

'Keep it. We'll be inside soon.'

But something stopped them before they were half way to the house.

'Ellyn. Look here. Are these footprints?'

'Someone's been walking around. Look, you can see where the snow's all messed up under the tree.'

'Mrs C do you suppose?'

'I dunno. She could have been collecting snow to melt for tea or soup, I suppose. But these prints look more like a man's shoes to me than wellington boots. And here. Aren't these an animal's prints?'

'A dog maybe?'

Or a wolf.

'More than one, I should say.'

Chad, biting his lip, studied the house.

‘Why aren’t there any lights on? When I left here every light in the place was blazing. To keep the shadows away, she said. To keep Brun from turning into a shadow and just – fading away.’

Chad, moving abruptly, ran the last hundred yards to the front door. Raising the brass knocker, he slammed it against the door. Once. Twice. Hollow thuds reverberating into the deepening cold, swallowed by the snow.

No answer.

‘Is there a bell?’

The bell push was covered in ice, the button frozen solid.

He knocked again, skin sticking.

Nothing.

Ellyn, frowning, peered more closely into the porch.

‘Why are there thumbtacks stuck in the door?’

‘Maybe they left us a note. There’s nothing here now.’

‘Let’s check the side door.’

It was closed, latched but not locked. A scrap of paper was thumbtacked to the weathered boards. As with the front door, the note, if that’s what it was, had been torn away, the message lost. Chad and Ellyn, exchanging glances, hesitated. Then cautiously, Chad pushed the door open.

The house was in darkness, shrouded in gloom.

He was about to call out when Ellyn’s finger touched his lips.

‘You smell that?’

‘Phew, yes.’

‘Is that... a dog maybe?’

‘Mrs C doesn’t keep dogs.’

‘Maybe she had visitors.’

‘Isn’t that what we’re afraid of?’

The kitchen was in darkness. Chad, groping, found a candle and some matches. The guttering flame seemed lonely in the large room and even the scent of rosewood could not completely drive away the animal stink that clung to the house.

‘We should make a hot drink. You must be freezing.’

Ellyn, watching Chad rub his hands together for warmth.

‘The pipes are frozen. Just like our farm and dad’s car. She melted ice and boiled water with blowlamps. Can you work a blowlamp?’

‘Dad used them all the time.’

‘Then by all means be my guest. There’s some tea around here somewhere. I’ll try to find it.’

Ten minutes later steam filled the kitchen, and the smell of herbal tea rose to join the sandalwood. Chad, warming his hands by the blowlamp flame, sipped slowly.

‘Where are Mrs C and Brun do you suppose?’

Ellyn, circling the kitchen, peering into cupboards and opening jars to examine the contents, merely grunted unintelligibly in reply.

Chad, feeling life return to his frozen limbs, was struck by an accompanying unease.

‘Something’s not right. They should be here.’

‘Maybe they’re upstairs.’

‘They’d have heard us. Come down.’

Chad, scowling.

‘I’m worried. Aren’t you worried?’

Ellyn, pulling aside the kitchen window curtain to peer into the gathering evening, suddenly stood bolt upright, pushing her glasses back up her nose in a characteristic gesture.

‘I am now. Come here.’

‘What is it?’

Chad, crossing the kitchen, felt a yawning chasm gape in his stomach.

‘Look at the window. She must have written in soap. See where the glass is all misty from the steam, but not the writing? She must have known we’d make tea. She must have known they’d take the other notes off the doors. She must have left them there deliberately so they wouldn’t think to look anywhere else. Clever.’

Chad, shoulder to shoulder with Ellyn, saw greasy words lettered neatly across the leaded glass.

Ignore the other note. Meet us at the Junk Shop. Attract no attention. The town is dangerous now – Mrs C.

‘No kidding.’

Ellyn, raising a hand, scrubbed the message from the window.

‘In case “they” come back.’

‘ “Ignore the other note.” – She must have written something else for them to find. Sent them on a wild goose chase. But who are they?’

‘The Grey Man.’

Chad, mind locked on footprints in the snow.

‘The man from the rental agency. You showed me the article about him in the paper. His brother, I mean. He was average. Bland. Nothing special. He wore a grey suit and neat shoes. Nothing about him caught the eye. Perfect balance. Near invisible. I bet they were his footprints outside. I nearly missed them remember.’

‘I remember.’

‘The Grey Man took the necklace from Brun when we were picnicking. He did something to Dad and Hjelle Miyake. He’s bad, Ellyn, I know he is. Even the thought of him makes me shiver.’

‘Where has she sent him, do you suppose?’

‘Who cares, so long as it’s not the Junk Shop. Come on, let’s grab a coat and get going.’

‘Unless...’

‘What?’

Chad, impatient, huffed and rubbed his hands for warmth.

‘Suppose “they” wrote this note for us? As a trap.’

Chad, frowning, blew out his cheeks.

‘I don’t see what we can do about that if it’s true. But it doesn’t feel true, somehow. I mean, writing in soap on windows... leaving a message that can only be read if you’re drinking tea... it’s all too, I don’t know, too devious, somehow, for them – or, no. Too desperate.’

‘I know what you mean. This seems like the act of a frightened person to me. Clever, but frightened. I think we should do as the note says. Go to the Junk Shop.’

‘I agree. There are coats in the hall. You turn off the blowlamp. I think we should leave by the back door. Follow the river for a mile or so then cut back onto the road.’

‘In case they’re watching?’

‘Just in case.’

Five minutes later the farm house was once again shrouded in darkness. Outside, it was still snowing, thick flakes that settled more deeply than ever. Trees and bushes were little more than domed mounds emerging from a smooth, unbroken sheet of shadowed white.

Ellyn, closing the back door softly behind them, turned again to face the night.

‘I can see a light.’

Chad, peering through the snow, struck off in the same direction.

‘Be careful!’

‘It’s OK. It’s just the greenhouse. It must have its own generator or

something.'

A steamy wall of glass emerged from the snow before them, running with moisture inside. Through the steam the shapes of leaf and bole strained upwards towards the light.

'The last bastion of summer, holding out against the snow.'

Ellyn, hand pressed against the glass, fingers outlined in glass-sheathed moss.

'Not a summer you ever want to see.'

Chad, remembering his last visit to the greenhouse.

'Come on, we'll have to go around.'

The snow did not seem so thick here by the greenhouse. Overhead the sky was electric blue and the first glimmer of stars struck lonely sparks from the snow. Keeping the warm glass walls on their left, they circled the building, coming quickly to the wall and hedge separating the garden from the countryside beyond. A tool shed beside the greenhouse yielded a wooden stepladder. Ten minutes later wall and greenhouse were behind them, and they were surrounded by trees.

'The river is down here somewhere. The woods aren't so thick here. We can walk along the banks.'

The ground, shielded by the trees, was not so thickly covered in snow as the garden. A layer of dead leaves, sudden autumn, squished beneath their feet. They had been walking for ten minutes when there came a far off rush and crash, as of something heavy falling to the ground. The sound, though distant, seemed very loud in the silence of the woods.

'What-?'

'Don't panic. I expect it was just some tree shedding a load of snow.'

'What if it wasn't?'

'Not really much we can do about it is there?'

'I suppose not.'

They continued walking.

‘We’re here.’

The river lay before them, cold, flat and still. Chad turned right and led the way carefully along the frozen riverbank. As he moved Ellyn gripped his arm.

‘Ow! What-?’

‘Shhh!’

-crunch-

A familiar sound.

Somewhere behind them snow fell in a rush and thud.

-crunchcrunch-

‘Footsteps.’

Chad, his voice a whisper.

‘Something’s following us.’

‘A big something if it can knock snow from trees like that.’

‘Come on. The road must be off to our right.’

‘No, hang on a minute. Let’s not go charging off.’

Chad, slowing, foursquare on frost-crusted leaves.

‘Hang on? This from the boy who runs from scarecrows?’

‘Scarecrows – or dead soldiers? Anyway, think about it. We’re half an hour or more from town. Can you run for half an hour? In snow like this – worse on the road?’

‘Probably not.’

‘I’d say definitely. So let’s think this through. If what’s following us wanted us, it would have us by now.’

‘And?’

‘What if it doesn’t want us? What if it wants what we want?’

‘Your sister?’

‘My sister. Her notebook. A key that was once a dragonfly.’

‘How can you be sure?’

‘It’s just a feeling. But they all seem connected somehow.’

‘By the music box?’

‘What else?’

‘Everything is connected, Chad. Like math. Join the dots and see the picture. Find the right equation and you can describe the universe. Change the equation and change the universe. And after all – isn’t that exactly what you think the Symphonion is doing?’

‘It’s a bit of a stretch to assume a Viking music box can somehow tap into Chaos Theory. The two things aren’t congruent.’

‘You prefer to believe in magic? A thousand year old spell coming to life now through your sister’s stories?’

‘Maybe not a spell exactly. But... an echo? Some kind of resonance? Yes, that’s it. Like the vibrations in a wine glass. Rub a glass and you hear a note. It has pitch and duration and it reaches our ears through the medium of air. Add water, change the shape or volume of the glass, and the note changes with it. We call that music. But really it’s just... I don’t know, call it physics with extra romance.’

‘And the footsteps?’

‘I can’t hear them any more. They’ve stopped. But I’m sure they’ll start moving again when we do.’

Ellyn, frowning, poked the end of her metal detector with her foot so it bounced gently back and forth.

‘So... what? Magic and science are the same thing?’

‘People used to believe that you know. Back in the days of Ptolemy; the Library of Alexandria. Astronomy and astrology were considered aspects of the same science by some of the brightest minds the world has ever known.’

‘And... circulating eventually back to the point...?’

‘We can’t run and we can’t stand still. What’s left?’

‘We could split up. See who it follows. Maybe one of us would make it.’

‘And if there’s more than one – whatever it is?’

Chad, frowning, shook his head.

‘I don’t want to split up. But I don’t want to lead whatever it is to Brun either.’

‘Well then. Let’s keep walking. We can think as we go. Maybe we’ll figure out what to do on the way. Who knows. Maybe we’ll lose it in the dark.’

Chad, nodding, began to walk.

The night folded around them. More snow fell, the thick flakes penetrating the dense tree cover, grey on black. The river seemed to stretch endlessly before them, always curving just out of sight, sometimes wide, sometimes narrow, but always smooth and flat and cold. Neither spoke as they moved forward, and neither cared to look back. But from time to time the silence was broken by the crunch of footfalls or the soft thud of snow being knocked from high branches, and occasionally a hot wind blew past them like the breath of some gigantic beast.

Chad, gripping his sister’s notebook ever tighter, thought, a wolf maybe – one big enough to swallow the sun.

Snow melted from the thinner branches at the touch of this intermittent wind then quickly refroze, leaving icicles which rang together like distant bells, a heartbreaking melody.

Time wore on, featureless, grey.

Chad, feet crunching and slipping in the snowy mulch edging the river, notebook a rolled tube in his fist, became aware of a steadily building tension. A touch on his arm told him Ellyn felt it too.

The hushed almost-silence of the trees seemed unreal.

Branches, laden with snow, ticked and cooled.

The river creaked and groaned as if somewhere far below that crust of ice undeniable masses of water still churned.

Ellyn said, ‘I want to run.’

‘Me too.’

Chad, nodding.

‘We mustn’t though, must we?’

‘That’s what it wants. For us to run. Blind flight without reason or thought. A clear road to Brun.’

‘Have you thought how we could lose it yet?’

‘No. You?’

‘No.’

-crunch-

The thud of snow.

A hot breath drew runnels of meltwater from nearby branches.

‘It’s getting nearer.’

Ellyn, her voice pin sharp, puncturing the hush.

‘Yes.’

‘We can’t go on like this. Miller’s Pond can’t be far, and the bridge. Then town. We’ve got to have a plan.’

‘OK, yes. Whatever’s following us, I think there’s only one of it. I don’t see how it can track us both if we separate. We should split up. Whoever isn’t followed should get to the junk shop.’

‘And the other?’

‘I don’t know.’

-CRKKK-

‘What’s that?’

‘Never mind. Give me the book. You keep the keys. In case they’re what it wants.’

Chad, fishing in his pocket, drew out a pair of keys, handed them to the girl.

‘OK, good idea. But you take the keys. The notebook’s probably more dangerous anyw-’

-CRKKK-KK-K-

‘-what-?’

‘The river! Chad, look at the river!’

A deep fissure split the ice. As they watched it jerked forward at a jagged angle.

-CRAAAAAAAACK-

‘It must have heard us.’

‘It’s on the ice. It’s coming.’

‘Run! Make for the bridge. When we reach it you go left, I’ll go right.’

Chad, running, tore aside the night.

Ellyn, beside him, floundered in the frozen mulch.

‘I can’t run! The ground’s too soft!’

‘The river! Get on the ice.’

‘We’ll fall!’

‘Maybe not. And it’ll catch us if we don’t.’

They ran, ripping through snow, pursued by cracks as the river fell to pieces at their heels.

Behind them footfalls came, faster, heavier, each accompanied by a deep throated crack of ice splitting under the strain of something heavy and hungry and utterly unstoppable.

Chad, running, heart a hammer, lungs straining, daggers of pain

shooting along every nerve and muscle in his legs and back and chest. Hot

(breath)

air scorched his neck.

-CRAAAAAAAAAAAACK-

Fissures, splitting ice, overtook them, tore the river ahead into a knife-edged jigsaw. Water burst from the cracks, flooding the ice, turning the snow to slush.

'The bridge! I can see it!'

'The water – too deep – can't run – anymore!'

'Don't – stop – now-'

Chad, falling, felt the world lose its grip, felt the cold burn of ice, the sting of churning slush.

'Ellyn!'

Chad, aquaplaning, slid forward, first on stomach, then on back, arms and legs churning, curtain of snow slapping his face, all sense of direction gone, helpless, accelerating.

A vague impression of deeper darkness, wet stone, black and mossy, then the trees were gone, replaced by a field of white, whirling endlessly.

His voice, hollow and echoing for a second, now deadened, swallowed by the endless white space.

'Ellyn?'

Nothing.

Chad, whirling slowly to a stop, blinked aside a foggy curtain of snow.

'Ellyn!'

'Chad – where are – can't – see-'

'I came under the bridge I think. We must be on the pond. Can you see it?'

Nothing.

Fog, swirling.

Snow fell, soft blanket, deadening all sound.

Chad, pummelled and aching, pushed himself to a sitting position then carefully stood up.

'Ellyn?'

Nothing.

No – not nothing – the thump of an animal loping closer.

The wolf?

No – a horse.

Chad, whirling, unsteady on the ice, saw nothing but white.

The sound, clearer now though still directionless, was definitely that of a horse's hooves.

Chad, eyes raking the gloom, mind locked to the memory of a giantess, beautiful and terrible, riding a night-black mare, armoured in leather and steel, eyes like amber coals.

The touch of her voice-

The taste of her lips-

A storm shaped like a woman. His sister.

'Brun!'

The snow, swirling, driven aside by an uncontrollable force. No girl but a woman. Mrs C riding a chestnut shire, hooves armoured with spiked shoes, rearing, a solid presence in his field of view. Beyond her, a nightmare of fur, a wolf the size of an elephant, larger maybe, smashing through the arched bridge, loping through a curtain of stone and snow, eyes blazing amber, jaws drooling slush and mortar; paws, smacking the frozen pond like furred hammers crazing the ice; breath, a mountain storm, blasting across woman and horse to reach Chad and drive him back across the ice.

‘Ellyn!’

The wolf bore a scar on its cheek, curved like the edge of a fingernail. All the colour in the world was in that bitter seam.

‘ELLYN!’

Groping in the snow for her hearing aid she stood, unknowing, and the creature loomed like the ghost of a storm above her.

‘Ellyn run – RUN!’

But she did not move, only Mrs C, urging the horse to turn. Rearing, the horse snorted steam and, stamping ice, whirled towards him.

‘Jump boy! For your life I said!’

Mrs C, her arm reaching, gloved fingers grasping his to swing him up onto the horse’s back.

‘Ellyn! We can’t leave her!’

‘Use your eyes boy, as you should have done already. The wolf will not touch her. It is her creature, or she its. At any rate they are for each other. And we are gone! Gittup now!’

The chestnut shire leaped forward into the night. And Chad, feeling muscles surging beneath him, was left with an image burned into his mind, a microsecond revelation before the curtain of snow fell shut around them.

Ellyn, poised before a ruin of stone, eyes locked to his, a promise only of disappointment and betrayal, hand raised to the wolf’s flank as the animal lowered its scarred head and nuzzled her cheek with its jaw.

Chapter 26

They rode.

Chad, hands clasped around his rescuer's narrow waist, ribs pressed to ribs, head back and screaming at the night, eyes jammed open, rammed with inescapable images, snow and fog ripped aside by the passing of the horse and the fury of its rider.

They rode, and the night parted for them, ghost grey in the darkness, trees and stiles giving way to houses, shops, abandoned cars, sullen, glaring lamp-posts; the thump of hooves on earth surrendering to the clatter of hooves on tarmac, staccato echoes swallowed by fog and snow.

They rode, and a vicious sky made the world a child's toy; a snow-globe, and the air so thick with flakes of dazzling white he could breathe only ice.

They rode, until horse stink and the bang of hard-muscled flesh drove Chad to shout, to gasp, to cling in silent desperation, finally to fall, head ringing with the force of the ride as Mrs C reigned the steaming shire to a halt, body hitting the ground with a barely felt thud, eyes locked on a figure looming over him. A man made of shadows, face the geography of night, eyes darker pools in the blackness.

A face he knew.

The music box will cost you everything you have.

The Junkman.

Later he sat, caught between dark man and light woman, a book bound in grinning orange cats resting on a table scraped free of junk, pages open and crackling with energy, the neatly inked words an apple-scented saw in

his head, and a distant war hammering like broken machinery somewhere beyond the horizon of the night.

‘ “Notes for a novel – by Brun Jordan.” ’

Mrc C, her voice a rasp to shred his mind, reading aloud from page one of the notebook.

Chad, head locked on the words, flashburned by images of his sister – writing, jumping off a wall, running through a graveyard. And more – a high street, a junk shop, the music box an inescapable tide; Brun, orbit lost, tumbling into its gravity well, child to a piper; and through all a heartbreaking melody like distant bells or melting ice.

‘My sister – where-?’

‘Stop whining boy!’

Mrs C, voice a blade, cutting him free of the memories.

‘With these words we may save her. Now be quiet and let me read!’

And read she did, voice a living thread in a room full of other people’s ghosts; a hook to pull him back through time and memory; notes for a novel – blueprints of another life.

‘ “We first meet Baldur in Ireland; 1014AD. But in truth his story begins a long time before that. And it ends even further from where it began. Unimaginably far. A place born of fire and ice, a future so remote that time has no meaning, and only three living things shall abide there; and one of them, a tree. Yggdrasil. The World Tree. Whose root, history; whose branch, time; whose fruit, destiny. Yggdrasil. The Encompasser. The All Father. And Baldur, once a warrior, shall be as a child there. And beside him shall be Freya, his sister-lover, and they shall be the seed of Yggdrasil, and they shall be the future of that time, as that time is the future of this.” ’

Chad, mind and throat clogged, struggled to deflect an overpowering fear. He thought, those words – my sister’s or another’s? The Symphonion’s?

Mrs C glanced sharply at him, a birdlike gesture.

‘Granted the prose style seems a little advanced for one so young. But who can say what force guided the pen, or the mind that wielded it?’

Chad, sight lost among crenellated towers of junk, seeking sanity, finding instead only the gaze of the Junkman, a darker blackness in the brass-hued room, twin wells holding dusty aeons as another might cup a vase of dried flowers.

'When did your sister begin to write this story?'

Chad, mind adrift, struggled for meaning, a stranger in his sister's strange land.

'Boy! I asked you a question!'

'I... I don't... about six months ago, maybe. I thought it was an essay. For school, you know? For history. But it can't be that, can it? An essay... it's just words. Research, extrapolation, conclusion. Just another kind of imaginative discourse. This is too... I mean, the language, it's like mathematics. More real, somehow, than just ordinary words.'

'Go on.'

Her voice, a thread in the room, drawing him on.

Chad, pensive, chewed his lip.

'What she wrote... it's more than just a story. More than just imagination. Her words are to fiction as fiction is to fact. Additional strata, extra space for the meaning to unfold into. A form in which you can see more of the truth. Like... I don't know... looking into a pool of ice, an infinity of mirrors, and seeing your face from a thousand different angles instead of only one.'

'The boy is a truthseeker.'

Mrs C, exchanging a piercing glance with the Junkman, returned narrowed eyes to Chad.

'I am moved to wonder who here is the greater wordsmith, brother or sister?'

Her eyes, hooks, trapped his gaze.

'No matter. The truth has domain. Soon we shall walk there, and your sister's words shall be the path.'

Lifting the notebook, her face occluded by grinning orange cats, she

read again.

‘ “We first meet Freya in Iceland; 1014AD. But in truth her story begins a long time before that. And it ends even further from where it began. Unimaginably far. A place born of death and ire, a future so remote that time has no meaning, and only three living things shall abide there; and one of them, a tree. Yggdrasil. The World Tree. Whose root, history; whose branch, time; whose fruit, destiny. Yggdrasil. The Encompasser. The All Mother. And Freya, once a goddess, shall be as a child there. And beside her shall be Baldur, her brother-lover, and they shall be the seed of Yggdrasil, and they shall be the future of that time, as that time is the future of this.” ’

‘It’s the same.’

Chad, puzzled, attempting to reason the words.

‘Not the same.’

The Junkman, voice a broken bell, hollow and metallic.

‘It is iterative.’

Mrs C, her words as precise as the symbols in any mathematical equation.

‘The child knows.’ Sharply. ‘Boy!’

Chad, wandering ancient memory, said, ‘She couldn’t decide. She had these two opening passages, and she couldn’t decide which to use. She asked me one day. Saturday. Football on the telly with the sound turned down. Hjelle Miyake treading Asian history with a fountain pen and blotter; Dad gone to the Yamaha, all spanners and sparkplugs and grease-monkey mojo; both lost to us, their passion a space we could never bridge. And Brun. My sister, Brun. She brought words to me and read to me and I was lost then as I am now. Lost in her words, an unwanted gift I can’t understand and daren’t ignore.’

His voice, soft and brittle, combing the junk-filled room for meaning in the memory.

‘It was about tools, I think, that moment. HM had her pens, Dad his spanners, Brun her words. What did I have? Football on the telly with the sound turned down. I had no tools. I was a tool. You read it aloud but it’s

her voice I hear. Her voice and the telly; pink noise and white noise; static, or, no – dead air, like a TV tuned into the space between channels. There was a space between her words. A space as big as the universe. A higher strata that even then she was unfolding into. And she wanted to take me with her. Brother, warrior; words, sword. A tool. A comfort. But no thought of me. Only what I could do for her.'

A moment, then, of pristine focus, and the revelation so sharp and clear, and of such perfect fit, that it was like a blade in a wound.

'That's what the Symphonion's doing. It's using me. Both of us. Like a tool. Shaping the world with us. Or for us. Both, maybe. I can't tell. Not yet.'

Then, blade from wound, realisation came and with it pain.

'It's here isn't it? The Symphonion.'

It stood in an adjoining room, gothic tiers tumbling upwards from a landscape of other people's lives; gathering light and substance from tottering strata of junk, all lacquerwork and chased silver, razor perfection. No, more than that. Its planes and angles more clearly defined than they had any right to be, more sharp and precise than the laws of geometry could ever allow.

Chad, trapped in its unearthly symmetry, thought, it's unfolding into another space. Additional strata of meaning. A place where right angles are more exact, where straight lines are straighter, a place where meaning itself is a bigger, deeper, broader thing than anyone has a right to know.

Chad, glimpsing an unknowable space in which he almost fit, felt terror, threads of lightning to bind him and, grasping the emotion as a drowning man clutches a lifeline, clawed his way back to a more familiar reality. Falling, he lay as one who, shipwrecked, clutches an unknown shore, cheek pressed to a threadbare carpet hard-stepped by planks, uneven floorboards.

'Help me.'

His voice, a mirror and the glass cracked.

Mrs C, turning pages, continued to read from the book of orange cats, her voice a hushed and urgent whisper.

The Myth of Ragnarok (she read). Adapted by Brun Jordan.

In Norse mythology Freya was the Goddess of Love and War. She chose who would live and die on the field of battle. If she kissed a warrior he would, in death, ascend in honour to Valhalla or descend in shame to the Land of the Dead. She rode at the head of the Valkyries and dragonflies, silver lightning, flew with her.

Freya was married to Odur, brother to Odin, first among the Gods. Odur loved Freya very much and one day decided to prove his love beyond measure. So he set off on a journey which took him to the ends of the earth, looking for the perfect gift. He found it in Yggdrasil, the Tree of Life, source of all power in the world. Taking wood from the Tree, Odur had dwarves fashion for Freya a music box which would sing of their fabulous future together.

When Odur saw what the dwarves had made he marveled. Never had such a beautiful device existed. Inside the lid was a picture, a portrait of his love. In the portrait Freya was wearing a necklace Odur did not recognise. Amber tears on a golden chain. Since the music box was designed to sing of their future lives together, Odur supposed he was to find this necklace for Freya to complete his gift. But though he searched for many more months, he was not successful.

Eventually, unable to bear being apart from his love any longer, Odur returned home with his gift, only to find that Freya already wore the necklace pictured in the music box. Thinking her husband dead these long months, Freya had fallen in love with Baldur, bravest of the Gods' warriors. The necklace was a sign of his love for her.

Now Odur presented Freya with his gift. But Freya was unable to bear the sight of the music box because it held a portrait of her wearing Baldur's necklace. Taking a dragonfly she made of it a silver key and locked the music box up, vowing never to open it again.

In a rage of jealousy, Odur vowed to kill Baldur and did so on the field of battle during one of the Gods' many wars with the Ice Giants of the North. As leader of the Valkyries, Freya could only kiss her lover one last time as he died and so, because of their affair, consign him to the Land of the Dead for all eternity. But as a token of her love she gave Baldur the silver key which locked the music box. The key was a symbol of her love, a lock that would never, now, be opened.

The battle was won, the Ice giants vanquished. But Freya took no pride or happiness in this. Instead she wept tears that turned to gold or amber when they struck the land or sea. In desperation Odur tried to comfort his wife but nothing he said or did could lift the weight of Baldur from her heart. Finally, unable to live without Baldur, Freya abandoned her husband and her position as leader of the Valkyries, and travelled to the Land of the Dead to claim back the soul of her lover, no matter what the cost.

At the banks of the river Gjoll Freya cried out for a chance to win back her love. A bargain was struck with the guardian of the Underworld, the Goddess Hel. If Freya could make every living thing in the world shed tears for Baldur then Hel would release him. If not, she would keep him forever.

Agreeing to the bargain, Freya did not realise Hel had herself fallen in love with Baldur. She knew Freya could never succeed in her task. Indeed although Freya elicited tears from every living thing in the world, one among them did not cry. Her husband, Odur.

Not knowing what to do, Freya returned to Hel and begged for another chance to win back her love. A second bargain was struck. Hel would allow Freya to enter in search of Baldur, but would remove both their memories of each other. If despite this they found each other and fell in love again then Hel would let them both go. If not they would both stay prisoners forever.

Knowing this was her last chance, Freya sacrificed her memories of her love and crossed the river Gjoll to the Land of the Dead, where she wandered in search of a destiny she could not know, following a sense of longing she could not explain.

Sensing the love between Freya and Baldur might be strong enough to prevail even in the Land of the Dead, Hel summoned Odur and together they plotted to keep the lovers apart. For Odur was still in love with Freya and wanted her back, and Hel was in love with Baldur and wanted him for herself.

Odur sent the wolf Fenrir, child of the trickster Loki and the giantess Angrboda, into the Underworld to bring Freya back from the Land of the Dead. But no sooner had the wolf departed than Odur was summoned by Odin to fight a great battle with the Ice Giants from the north who, seeing dissension in the ranks of the Gods, had decided to take for themselves the

fruit of Yggdrasil, the World Tree, source of all power in the world.

Odin knew that without their best fighter or the leader of the Valkyries, the war with the Ice Giants was a war the Gods could never win, and so he instructed the messenger Hermod to carry Odur's music box into the Underworld. He hoped the song would remind Freya and Baldur who they really were so under the terms of Hel's bargain they could be released to fight for the Gods against the Ice Giants.

Hel considered this act a betrayal of her agreement with Odur, for it meant she would lose Baldur. And in revenge for this betrayal Hel sent an army of the dead to fight with the Ice Giants against the Gods.

Odin now sought further advice from Mirmir, wisest of the Gods, and was told that those consigned to hell should never return: to bring them back would upset the balance of the universe and bring the world to an end. Admitting his mistake, Odin asked Mirmir to help restore balance and order.

Taking Odin's left eye in payment, Mirmir entered the Land of the Dead to stop the wolf Fenrir from rescuing Freya, and the messenger Hermod from playing the music box.

But all their efforts came to nothing.

Despite every obstacle placed between them, Freya and Baldur met at last. Though they could not remember each other, each recognised the gift they had given the other. Baldur recognised the amber necklace he had given Freya and Freya recognised the key which had once been a dragonfly, her own gift to Baldur. Through the gifts they recognised in each other the deepest love. And as the last battle for the destiny of the Earth began Hel saw that their love could never be broken and in despair made good on her promise, returning their memories and releasing them from the Land of the Dead.

Free at last, Freya and Baldur joined the ranks of the Gods at the battle

of Ragnarok. But Odur, jealous of their love and knowing if the Gods won the war he would lose Freya forever, declared, “In my wealth shall no man delight.”

Thus saying, he ordered Fenrir to eat the moon and the sun. The world came to an end in a final apocalypse. Mirmir’s prophecy had come true.

Now the world was plunged into icy darkness and everything that drew breath died. Yet throughout the destruction Freya and Baldur lived among the roots and branches of Yggdrasil. There they waited until gradually, from the icy darkness, a new earth arose. One day the daughter of the sun rose into the sky and greeted the world with light.

Then Freya and Baldur, reborn as mortals, emerged from Yggdrasil to greet with joy the new, green earth they had made, over which they would now rule together, forever.

Chad, groaning, lost to the tide of history, the undertow of her voice. A drowning man cast upon an unknown shore. Clutching, desperate, face pressed into the ground, fingers clawing at the very bones of the earth.

He choked, vomiting memories like icy seawater. Not water. Nor a shore. Instead a Victorian carpet, its pattern and colour long since lost to time. Slowly, the room came back into focus. Floorboards, thinly carpeted, bit into his cheek.

‘Help me with him.’

Mrs C, her voice a cord to lift him; hands to sit him on a nearby piano stool, to prop him against a table made from the inside of a church organ.

‘That’s it then. Ellyn was right.’

His voice, dessicated, fluttered in the room, moth to the flame of understanding.

‘The music box is singing the end of the world.’

‘Rather, the beginning of another.’

Mrs C, her voice unusually hushed.

‘Remaking all in its image. But how? And why?’

‘You don’t know?’

‘If I knew, boy, would I ask?’

Silence, almost painful, hung briefly between them.

‘Brun’s book.’

Chad, his words like his throat: parched, brittle.

‘Give it to me!’

He grasped the book as she brought it to him, felt grinning cats writhe beneath his fingers, a gulf of understanding yawn within.

‘Look!’

The words she had read, of Baldur and Freya, of Yggdrasil, the World Tree, of a time beyond Ragnarok, the end of the world; all now gone, the pages blank, no more than fresh, untrammelled snow.

‘You read the words. Now they’re gone. Now it’s got them. It’s using them. You made the words its tools. Fuelled the fire of a different tomorrow. Anything we know, it knows.’

His voice, a blade in flesh, the words a shriek.

‘I was wrong. This book is useless. Anything we read from it can be used against us. We were tricked!’

A moment hung in the room, perfect saw-edged realisation.

‘Then we must turn it off. End the song.’

Mrs C, her voice a force driving him to anger.

‘You have the key. The key that was once a dragonfly. Take the disk from the box, put it back in the drawer and lock it up forever. Still the voice of the Symphonion. We must have silence in the world or all is lost.’

Silence.

Chad, near collapse, chin down on a table papered with ancient hymns, felt anger build to rage, the energy filling him up, charged particles,

lightning before the storm.

‘Think you know everything don’t you? Think you’ve got all the answers you need.’

Chad, rising, more storm than boy, and his voice was thunder.

‘I tell you this, old woman: the world is a bigger place than that. Every one of us is a bigger place than we know. You, me, Brun. Each of us a landscape and a lifetime is not enough to explore it.’

Her face, a mirror to surprise, open parentheses cupping a new equation.

‘It knows though. It understands. The Symphonion. It can’t lie. It can’t feel. It just does what it does, a circuit running a program – no, more than that. An engine, and imagination its fuel, and life the page on which it writes. A force of nature. Anyway, why shouldn’t we explore it, this ever-changing life it offers us? What else are we for if not that?’

‘True enough on any normal day but today is no ordinary day.’

Her voice, rising to match his, force for force, blow for blow.

‘And this song – this Skald – is not yours to sing. You hear the music of another and it is changing you. This is not your Skald. The time has come for silence!’

Chad, eyes fixed on a future only he could see, flung words like blasts from a storm.

‘Physics! Biology! Magnetism! Gravity! You can’t silence these. You can’t silence the Earth. Static electricity! The Aurora Borealis! Screams in the night and only the stars to hear. Old woman, all that we are is just polarising forces. Me and Brun, we’re the poles. To us, the power. We’ll sweep you and all your quaint notions of the universe aside!’

‘Enough boy! The key! The key!’

The storm, breaking, left him weak and sweating.

‘My heavens.’

Chad, fish out of water, gasping.

‘Not - my voice. Not my - ideas. I’m changing. It’s changing me - isn’t

it?'

The room, choked with the scent of apple blossom, seemed to warp around them while somewhere beyond, a heartbreaking melody rang like distant bells or melting ice.

Distant – but coming closer.

'The Symphonion is changing everything. You see the truth of it. All the words it needs, it has – and it has made of them a sword.'

'Skaldenland.'

The word came from him like the tolling of a bell, and eternity railing against its bitter end.

'The land remade by song.'

Chad groaned. 'Yes that's all very well but what does it mean?'

Mrs C, scowling, a withering look and him the victim.

Deep inside Chad knew the answer to his own question. Either the music box was giving them memories that weren't theirs, or it was returning memories they'd forgotten. Either way it was changing them. Changing everything. But how? And how could it be stopped? Chad didn't believe in magic. He believed in science. Science was what you held onto when the world around you went mad. When your mother died and you felt like you were losing yourself right along with her. Science. Science! Not magic. You couldn't remember the future. It hadn't happened yet.

Then he remembered how Brun had described the music box in her story: a gift made to celebrate the lives of Freya and her betrothed; to sing their past and future.

Chad whistled softly.

What if their future, his and Brun's, was Freya and Baldur's past? Could they remember it then? What if they were Freya and Baldur?

Suddenly the idea of magic being real didn't seem so hard for Chad to

believe after all.

‘Time is running out. We have to still the song. Silence its voice forever. Where is the key? Boy – where is the key?’

‘I gave it to Ellyn. For protection.’

Chad, exhausted, sank back onto the piano stool.

‘She tricked me. Pretended to be my friend. The key is out there somewhere. In the snow. With the wolf.’

Chapter 27

Silence.

No breath of life.

Then-

‘Foolish boy-’

Mrs C, her voice pin sharp, the accusation razor-edged.

‘I-’

‘Silence!’

The Junkman, his voice a tunnel-rumble.

They were quiet.

A sound: firm, repeated. A knock upon the front door.

‘Hey, it’s me. Is anyone in there? Chad? Anyone?’

‘The boy – Vincent.’

Mrs C, her voice the hiss of water on a dead beach.

‘That’s not Vincent.’

Chad, standing, stomach knotted, skin running with static.

‘I told you! A man made of stars! Changed by the music box. A Hunter-’

‘Hunting you, maybe. Or your sister.’

Mrs C, voice a whisper.

‘We have to leave. Now.’

‘Leave? I thought we were safe here.’

‘No place is safe that is part of this world. The song of the music box is a tide and this place is no harbour, just a temporary anchor.’ She looked around, gaze darting to and fro among the junkscape. ‘The weight of other days, other lives. Decades of such, maybe more. A good anchor but not immovable, I think. Now they have found us. The chain is broken, the anchor lost. We must leave this place.’

‘Where shall we go?’

‘Not you.’

Her voice, cold, unrelenting, not quite a threat.

‘What!’

‘Today you are no boy but a warrior. A song has made you and this man made of stars is your destiny.’

‘I - what-?’

Chad, reeling.

‘Listen carefully boy for listening is not your gift and I have neither time nor wish to repeat my words. What is important here is your sister. And the music box. They must be taken to a place of safety. A solid place, with weight of years to make a true anchor.’

‘You’re talking about the Crown. The church there.’

‘The world doesn’t like new things, Chad. New things are important.’

Ellyn, her voice echoing in his mind.

‘Maybe the world gets jealous. Maybe it wants to hurt you, even destroy you. Then the old places in the world, the ancient cliffs and caves and trees, the oldest of stone walls and ideas... they’d act for the world, wouldn’t they?’

‘Ellyn said old places are our enemies-’

‘I know what she said. Old places are the enemies of change. What among us wants change?’

The Symphonion.

Twisting land and friend, skeining them, weaving a cold tomorrow from the threads of summer and family.

‘I see.’

The sound of bells or melting ice, no longer distant but crashing close enough to touch, filled his mind.

The knock at the door came again, louder this time.

‘Chad? I know you’re in there. I can hear you talking. Why won’t you let me in? I’m worried about Brun.’

‘You want me to stay here.’

Chad, heart a frozen lump.

‘Distract him while you make a run for it with Brun. You want me to stay here – alone.’

‘Not alone.’

The Junkman, his voice the distant rumble of war approaching.

Chad glared at him, patience lost, temper flaring. For a second he saw a man seemingly made of darkness. No features, only endless black, the long dark of a universe without stars, without energy; a universe eternally consuming itself through black holes the size of galaxies. He thought, as if the universe itself could hate and, in hating, sought its own end in mutual destruction; one last war before time ended forever.

Chad, blinking then, saw only a man. Tall, odd of manner and dark of skin but a man beyond all doubt.

A knock came again upon the door.

‘Chad! Come on matey, do us a favour, it’s freezing out here!’

‘My sister. You’d better look after her-’

Chad, turning, stopped abruptly.

The woman was gone.

‘It is time.’

The Junkman, his voice a cannon, the sound swelling beyond reason, close to detonation.

Chad, turning, felt he was motionless, that the room revolved around him. For a heartbeat Galileo was wrong. He was the centre of a universe uniquely his own. Rooms, doors, threadbare carpet, endless reefs of junk: drifting past like distant nebulae. Then his hand was on the shop door, the frosted glass panels weeping condensation, sticky with cold, the wood frame humming with energy; the sound of machinery, no longer broken, no longer distant, instead close enough to set his teeth on edge and blur his vision.

Chad, turning the latch, pulled open the door.

Snow, pointillist dream, inked charcoal sky.

Chad blinked sudden frost from his eyelids. The world, a child’s snow-globe, lay coldly expectant before him. Street lights, cars, kerbs, shops and houses softened by sticky white flakes into near-shapeless mounds. A Viking barrow, the ancient invader’s burial site duned by time and grass, absorbed by the landscape but forever apart from it. A time-softened bridge to distant years.

A hole cut in the snowscape moved, and no crystal flakes drifted within its edge. Chad, eyes aching, mind caught, saw a distinct silhouette. Arms, legs, a torso, a head. But no face. A hole made of clear night but shaped like a boy and full of stars. Inside the shape Chad saw no town, just a frosty silhouette of rocks and trees outlined against a sky the deepest blue of hospital X-rays. When the shape moved, so his view of the landscape changed also. He thought, as if the man standing there was no man but a window. No solid shape but an opening through which he could glimpse another time, a place as far from here as yesterday.

‘Nice one matey. Even brass monkeys would have a hard time tonight.’

The shape, its voice Vincent’s.

‘Can I come in and see Brun? I’m dead worried about you guys you know.’

Chad, stepping out into the snow-globe world, pulled the door shut behind him. The latch clicked shut. No way back.

'No mate. You can't come in. That place... it's not for you.'

His gaze, searching a face that was not there for eyes that did not exist.

'Anyway it's not my sister you want right now – is it?'

Perception. Words as sword. Question as weapon.'

The voice, evolving slowly from the boy-shaped hole in the night, no longer entirely Vincent's but something greater, deeper, older.

'Asking is your gift. The Song chose well, I think.'

'Not song. Skald.'

Chad, stepping forward, moved slowly into the night. The hole with the voice of a boy edged backwards to accommodate him. Chad, eyes locked on the space where a face should have been, saw only a smoothly panning silhouette of cliff and castle cut from a night bursting with stars, yet free of snow. A single pulsing quasar blinked slowly where an eye should have been. Once, twice and then gone, passing from vision as the shape moved.

'I'm not here to fight you.'

Chad, voice firm, surprised himself with his own words.

'Wise, too, beyond his years. I am older, stronger, and my heart is set upon my need as a sword is set upon an anvil, its true purpose forged in strength and hate.'

'And love?'

The shape did not answer.

'Come on Vincent. Or the Hunter, or whoever you are. Walk with me. I think we've got a lot to talk about.'

Chad, turning, left the sanctuary glow of the shop for the frozen reefs of the high street. His footsteps, gagged by snow, made no sound. He walked and the shape moved beside him, keeping pace easily though Chad could detect no actual movement – just a boy-shaped snow-free nightscape, the exact opposite of an object possessing dimension and mass.

‘Negative space. An object defined only by its surroundings.’

Ellyn, her voice washing up from what seemed like the distant past, flotsam and jetsam to be picked over by a mind walking ever wilder paths.

‘Why don’t you tell me what you’ve done with Vincent.’

Chad, walking tunnels of snow carved by light, sodium yellow leaching from lamp-posts, felt himself slipping from light to shade and back again.

‘I am Odur. Brother to Odin, First among Gods.’

‘Slipped a cog have we? Last time I looked you were Vincent. You run the Arcade, fancy my sister and find me a 24 carat gold-plated pain in the nether regions.’

‘Freya is my love and Baldur my bane. In my wealth shall no man delight.’

Chad, walking. Beside him the shape. Hole.

Light and dark.

Dark and light.

Town; no town.

Snow and Stars.

‘ “In my wealth shall no man delight.” I’ve been hearing that a lot lately. I’ve wondered about it. I think I’ve puzzled it out. Why don’t I tell you and you stop me if I’m wrong?’

The shape, gliding, said nothing.

‘Freya and Odur were married. But Freya had an affair with Baldur, a warrior. And Odur didn’t like it. He was jealous. He used the cover of a war to kill Baldur. Freya kissed her love and sent him to hell. She didn’t want to but it was her job. Her destiny.’

Snow, drifting.

Boy shaped hole, filled with yesterday’s stars. And more – shapes, running the night. Dark figures and the gleam of silver. Soldiers, preparing for war.

Chad, mouth set, strode on through the sodium shuttered night.

‘That should have been the end of it. But it wasn’t, was it? Because Freya still loved Baldur. And the gods needed Baldur, because he was the best fighter they ever had. The only one who could turn the tide at Ragnarok. The end of the world. When the earth itself wakes to war, giants made of ice and stone, and a wolf called Fenrir swallows the moon and the sun, and all will end in dark and cold and hate.’

Chad, feet gliding on snow, pillow-soft and cold as the moon.

‘Everyone has value, Vincent. Mine is in words – or sword, depending on who you believe.’

Chad, accelerating. His words tempered, razor sharp.

‘All will end, Vincent, in dark and cold and hate. In my wealth will no-one delight. Ever.’

Chad, running now, the street a blur. Lamp-post to lamp-post, islands of light in a sea of night.

‘You need me. I feel it. Why else the great hunt? Oh, you want to kill me, I feel that alright. Your jealousy burns like the sun. But you can’t kill me, can you? There’s a greater need in you, isn’t there? Something overwhelming. I’m not your prey, am I? I’m your ally. Whether you like it or not.’

Chad, running, breathless word and muscle pumping into the night. Beside him, voiceless, the shape kept pace without moving. But as he ran Chad began to see that, as with everything touched by the Song of the Symphonion, the shape was changing. It was flickering – no, vibrating, like a broken machine. There, not there; real, unreal. A black hole in the snowy night; a boy cast in sodium glare. Hole, boy; boy, hole.

Today and yesterday.

Snow and stars.

Chad, eyes narrowed, thought, it’s Vincent – but only in the light. Between the lamp-posts, in the darkness, it’s a shape, a hole cut in the world, a window to some ancient war, a god, the Hunter.

Chad, gasping, slid to a stop, arms curled around fluted iron, fingers

glued to the old-fashioned lamp-post by his own icy sweat.

‘My parents are gone, my sister can’t wake up, you’re turning into a man made of stars and my friend Ellyn... I don’t know. Everyone I know has changed. Is changing. It’s the Symphonion. The music box. It’s changing everything – everyone. Even me. It’s been changing things for a long time, I think. I have to know why.’

Chad, adrift in butterfly light, the shapes that you see when you’ve been running too hard for too long.

‘Vincent, please.’

The shape, hesitating. In the eerie sodium half light no Hunter now but a child. A boy, cast in stars, peeping out from a hole in the world.

‘Chad? What-’

‘The Symphonion! Vincent, the music box! Tell me what you know about it! Tell me now!’

Chad, reaching into a boy-shaped hole in the world felt not earth or stars but flesh, a solid warmth bundled against the cold in jacket and scarf. There was a scream in his arm, deep in the muscle and sinew like static electricity. Forces, polarising, tore at his body, his mind. Then, unable to stand before his need, the moment stretched and snapped, the release of tension, a kick hard enough to bruise.

Both boys, driven to their knees in the snow, floundering in a pool of flickering sodium light.

Snow, drifting silently, tiny flakes of icy cold settling on hair and shoulders.

‘The music box.’

Chad, teeth rattling, voice dry and cold as the snow.

‘I have to know about the music box.’

A moment passed, snow duned, silent.

‘The music box? I... don’t...’

Vincent, breath steaming, cheeks rimed with frozen tears.

‘Chad... I’m so cold. Cold on the inside. And empty. Where’s Brun? Her stories keep me warm. I need Brun!’

‘You and me both.’

Chad, voice and mind edged with steel.

‘And that’s our problem, right there. Isn’t it?’

‘Problem? Chad, what problem?’

Vincent, mind lost in the labyrinth of snow and light, one half gone to shadows and cold, an ancient war.

‘What’s going on? Crikey it’s cold. Where’s Brun?’

Chad, treading duned snow, thought, Vincent doesn’t know anything. He can’t help me. But he’s only Vincent in the light. I have to get him out of the light so Odur will come back. Odur will know about the Symphonion. Odur will have answers. But Odur will burst Vincent the way ice crystals burst a frozen apple. I won’t be able to save him.

Chad, mind a trap and understanding the prey.

‘ “Words as sword.” ’

Vincent, his voice a recent memory, cold and hard.

‘ “Question as weapon.” ’

No – not Vincent. The Hunter. Odur.

‘ “The Song chose well, I think.” ’

‘Come on mate.’

Chad, rising, pulling Vincent to his feet.

‘Let’s get you to Arcade. There’s a flask of tea there. That’ll warm you up.’

Chad, walking the older boy firmly, thought, and a shore. Where the sea kisses the land and both are changed by the touch. A place where the lights from the town can’t reach. A fitting place for a boy to become a god. Then I’ll have the answers I need. I can save Brun. And maybe the world.

But by the time they reached Arcade it was too late for tea. Too late for warmth. Too late for stories.

The bay, silent, choked with ice.

Bergs like scarps, jagged strokes splashed into the snow choked sky.

Beyond the sky an ancient mass; huge, deeply cratered. The moon, grinning engine of love and war, unseen for so long, now threading the night.

Near invisible threads of moonlight hung from the sky, wires – or no, kite strings, and grey clouds the kites. The moon-wires hummed. The sound, more a feeling, drilled deep into Chad's head. His teeth, already chattering with the cold, set even further on edge.

The pier, nothing more than a ramp of mounded snow, the struts and wires crusted with dripping white, stalactites and stalagmites, until it seemed they were not outdoors at all but inside a cave, a columned hall, a great cathedral made of ice presiding over the end of the world.

'It's time Vincent.'

Chad, shivering.

'Show me.'

Silence.

Drifting snow.

'Show me!'

A moment, then, 'I had the music box made for her.'

Vincent, his voice strangely deep. Or maybe Odur, the Hunter, his voice not yet formed.

'For Freya, my wife, the most beautiful of all Asgard. The goddess of love and war.'

Chad, shaking his head from the strange vibrations produced by the deepening voice, momentarily saw double. A landscape of summer overlaid by winter.

Summer of now.

Winter of then.

Vincent said, ‘We were happy and in love. But I wanted more. O God thou art like Man. I had to prove my love. And that was my undoing. I left on a long quest to find a gift for my love. The perfect gift. I found it in the wood of Yggdrasil, the World-Tree, the giver of life and bearer of the fruit of destiny. I took wood from the tree, had the finest crafters make from it a music box. A box that could sing of the past and future, the life we would live together. A noble life, filled with beauty and love and the laughter of children.’

Vincent, fading now, seemed to bloom suddenly, no boy but a man, growing, expanding, filled almost to bursting with this new being as the new being was filled almost to bursting with regret and jealousy.

‘But the box was made too well. Inside the lid was a lacquered inlay, a portrait in wood of Freya wearing a necklace I knew she did not own. It was beautiful. Amber and gold, fragments of sunlight on a gossamer chain. It was perfect. A necklace I thought I should find for her. A token. Something to complete my gift. Seal our love.’

Chad, mind suddenly trapped by eighteen amber tears on a chain of gold, said nothing.

‘But I travelled too long and too far. And without success. When I returned, Freya, thinking me lost, had given her heart to another. A warrior. One who had sealed their love with a necklace. Amber tears on a golden chain. The same necklace shown in Freya’s portrait in the music box.’

Vincent, his voice ancient ice, bitter and broken.

‘My present was perfect. I was not.’

Snow, crawling the shore, duned at their feet.

‘The warrior’s name was Baldur.’

Chad, standing mute, had no words. The truth, no comfort or armour but cold, stars held deep in ice.

‘It was you, Chad.’

Chad wanted to run, to shout and kick the ice covered rocks of the beach. He felt a scream building inside, inarticulate, animal, neither understanding nor guilt nor apology. Felt it swell to bursting.

You're wrong! I don't love her! Not like that! For crying out loud I would never – she's my sister!

He turned away. A moment. A heartbeat.

When he looked back, Vincent was gone, the boy peeled away by humming moon-wires, clothed again in darkness and filled with stars. No more answers. No libretto for a song to change the world. Just darkness, just stars falling into a bottomless pit. A black hole consuming everything Chad could see through the boy shaped window. Frozen pier, ice-locked bay, spear-tipped bergs under a sky the colour of hospital X-rays.

The light inside the window Vincent had become faded, unravelling into darkness. The dark before the dawn.

Chad, eyes locked to a starry landscape, saw clearly for the space of a heartbeat, and it was like looking back into a dream.

The bay, locked in ice beneath a sky full of stars, bright as any day, a jagged landscape under giant sails. Wooden ships like ocean liners, with dragon heads for prows, pulled by

(wolves)

dogs the size of horses on wooden runners the size of trees. Boats heavy enough to crack even the yards-thick ice choking the bay.

An army, a dream army, leaving his

(story, it was her story, Brun's)

head for a different world, and the sound of their coming was the thunder of war horns and the howl of wolves and the tunnel-scream of men shouting in a language he almost knew. The voice of war. The last battle of all.

And then even this vision was gone, obscured by a detonation of light as the shape that had been Vincent finally reached the point of bursting, of gravitational collapse, no boy now but a nova, and the blast driving Chad headlong into the snow, his hands, plunging through to the frozen sand

beneath.

And the storm had a voice. The voice of a boy become a god. Vincent, Odur, thing of stars and ill desire.

IN MY WEALTH SHALL NO MAN DELIGHT!

Chad, reeling from the hammer blow of sound, was driven even further into the icy beach.

Ice, melting, vaporised, streamed away into the night.

Snow, blasted instantly to fog, swirled and was gone.

The light, fading at last, revealed no boy but a man, a giant clothed in steel and leather, jealous eyes like pulsars spinning madly in the night. And his face, bursting with love and rage, and terrible understanding.

‘Vincent, mate-’

But Vincent was gone forever.

Only Odur - the Hunter - remained.

A giant, and the world cracked beneath his weight; and the night, clear again, hung like a shroud across his shoulders; one arm outflung in greeting, caped in stars and moon, stellar dust, dark matter.

Chad, seeing his own future in the terrible, beautiful change, scrambled madly to his feet, turned and ran.

Chapter 28

Moon-wires stitched him to the earth. He broke them, running, with arms, legs, face. Recoiling, the wires snapped and whined, flaying earth and sky and time; peeling flesh from the world, the beach, here and now.

Moon-wires – or moon-wolves?

Something moved inside him. Inside his body. Current arced. Flashes of power, of vision, the truth now and one which burned, bright sun in his veins.

Chad, nova-boy, dying inside.

His voice a hammer on the day.

'I live in this moment! Here and now! It can't change! I CANNOT CHANGE!'

Words he knew for lies. Whatever had been inside Vincent, whatever had become the Hunter, was out; a hideous dawn, flame from an explosion, the Big Bang, and waves of force crashing through here-and-now, corrupting time and space as they came. And so he ran and, running, pulled the night around him, sucked it into him, choked on it; a child breathing liquid who, for the first time, tastes air.

Screaming, he breathed in the night. Not night but day. Not town and beach but fields and hills, dressed in forest and fog-dew, capped by cold granite and oak, armour, arrows and hate. Castle Clontarf, challenging iron clouds for dominion of the land.

Running now, no boy but a man, a soldier; his feet, naked, crashed into the earth, dug deeply, flung clots of dirt into the air, splashed dew and seeds and glistening webs, slashed a path through the day.

Stop running idiot – panic won't solve it – use your head – work it out – wake the King – No! – wake the sister – No! No! No! – the Music Box – forces polarising – shockwave from Victor – the Hunter – must get – away must –

He stepped – so – and the world changed.

Day for night.

He was back on the beach. No man but a boy. Sails looming far into the sky as the dream-boats beached, cracking ice.

Step.

It was day and his heart a hammer in boiled leather armour. Cudgel and axe posed to strike, sword belted but ready for use. Mind humming with death, a storm of dragonflies.

Step

It was night and the boats poured a dream army into the snow. Men and wolves, running the night. Minds humming with death, a storm of dragonflies.

Step.

And day.

Step.

And night.

Daynightdaynightdaynightandthe images filling his brain, train lamps in a tunnel, two wars with a single voice – no, a multitude of voices but only one war. Not Clontarf. Ragnarok. The end of the world.

-step-step- -step-step-

-day-night- -boy-man-

-step-step- -man-god-

-god-man- -man-boy-

-tearing through days like rows of thorn trees; memories that slashed and scored; barbed snare and him the bait. He thought, Irishmen,

Norsemen; Ice Giants, Norse Gods. Links in a chain, but how do they fit-?

-stepdaystepnightstepstep-

-stepboystepmanstepgodstepmanstepstep-

He.

Stopped.

Night. Galaxy of stars. The world an X-ray.

Silence. Only breathing. Summer in, winter out.

A heartbreaking melody like distant bells or melting ice.

The high street. Clotted cars. Lamp posts like trees.

Wolves, winding between the cars, slow shadows duning, their eyes cold stars, their breath hot wind, and snow melting where it touched.

Frozen, he watched them come. Felt them come. Smelt them come. The stink of iron and blood was in their fur and starfire filled their eyes.

He thought, Sergeant Ron in the Station. The Library Triplets. Kids in Arcade. Tourists in the Museum. How many will die while I run between worlds? Vincent, Ellyn, Mrs C, Brun. How many changed by the Symphonion – and what have they become?

What will happen to Brun if I change too?

Wolves, aligning; filings on paper and him the magnet. Overhead the sky was ice on fire. Aurora Borealis, circling, endless carousel.

Forces, polarising.

World, turning.

The wolves.

Leaped.

He.

Moved.

The battlefield. Clotted crags. Mud and fog.

Soldiers winding between the crags, slow shadows duning, their eyes blood-glazed, their breath a vicious wind, and death came where they moved.

Frozen, he watched them come. Felt them come. Smelt them come. The stink of war was in their hair and hate filled their eyes.

He thought, my clan, my friends, How many will die while I run between worlds? Hrafn. Thorstein. How many changed by this song of war – and what have they become?

What, then, of Freya if I should fall?

Soldiers, aligning, drawn to his breath; Boru, High King of Meath's dogs, and him the prey. Overhead, the sky was smoke and fog and screams. Somewhere in the distance wind sang in cloth. The Raven Banner; Standard of Sigurd Hlodvirsson, Earl of Orkney; his chief and said to fight with the Old Gods at his side.

Norsemen and Irishmen, a country divided.

Forces, polarising. World, turning.

The soldiers charged.

He moved.

Falling, more by chance than design, and the wolves passed across him like a storm. Stink of old fur, hot breath, boiling hearts. They were gone. In their wake came soldiers. Barefoot, dragon-helmed, wielding cudgels and axes, sweeping into the town, undertow of hate in a tide of houses. A Standard rode high before them. Ravens on a trangular yellow field. Tassels. Curved outer edge. The Mark of Odin. Cold air struck the flag and the cloth snapped and whined. Where it passed, so passed colour, until all was monochrome, snow and stars on a field of gray, under an X-ray sky.

He froze, stunned by the Raven, mind locked on a day drained of colour. Scattershot images: a necklace of amber and gold; its twin made of buttercups; a grey man become a wolf; a storm of dragonflies; Brun insensible, gone to shadows and unkind rest. He thought, the kites that scraped all colour from the sky, that tricked and trapped me, had patterns like this. Were shaped like this. I thought them wolves, they snapped and whined so. But they were birds. Odin's Ravens. Portents. The mark of war

and me their ink.

With this thought the silence cracked.

Screams came like rain.

The tide surged.

Lifted, he was carried away on the swell.

Cudgel thrust into one hand, axe pressed into the other.

Heart on fire.

Head on fire.

Running now, his mind lost to a music box, amber tears like pieces of sunlight; goddess on a field of lacquered wood.

The Symphonion. War-singer.

Engine of change.

The Enemy.

It was time to end this song.

He ducked, more by judgement than luck, and the first soldier passed overhead, disembowelled. Drenched in gore, he turned, rose, set his feet and swung.

Human pendulum, he rocked, cudgel and axe, dragon-ring a silver arc, and death was cast from him as spray from a wet dog.

Weapons snapped and whined. Bone cracked. Flesh split.

The day gone to frantic shriek and hate and splashed blood; stink and hurt lost to the fog; grey within endless grey.

He swung – crack! - another of Boru's dogs fell.

Crack! Crack! Another. Another.

The tide surged.

Lifted, he was carried away on the swell.

Death gripped tight in gloved fists.

Cudgel and axe. Heart and head on fire.

The tide surged.

Running now, his eyes lost to the Irish Banner, gold harp on a field of blue.

Boru. High King of Meath.

Giant among Men.

The Enemy.

It was time to end this war.

Boy and man; armour of hate, sword of intention, walking two wars as one; spanning time and space as music spans lines on a stave; linking, drawing all together; a new pattern, a song to change the world.

And in a church on a hill the Symphonion, unfolding, blocks on blocks, silver burning out to dazzling glare, lacquer work fading to a dull amber glow. Starfire, erupting from every line and angle, and the world the hazy blue of a hospital X-ray. The scent of apple-blossom clogged his nostrils and the piercing whine of distant machinery smashed into his head.

Man and boy; wars; mangled strata, warped geology. England, Ireland; now, then; Arcade, Police Station, Library, Museum; field, forest, battlefield, castle. Soldiers running barefoot through the earth; wolves howling and their eyes like stars; armies, surging with a voice he now spoke; cudgels and axes bringing the world to war and ruin to all.

Fog cloaks the battlefield; the dead, propped scarecrows, foxfood.

He has killed many. Beyond counting, their numbers fill his head. Breath burns in him. His shield is gone, with it his arm. Braced against a tree stump, he surveys his work.

A camp lies in ruins, dead storm and him the eye. Soldiers and dogs gone to blood and gore. Hungry fire coughs charred flesh. The stink of it chokes him. Blood and iron. Flesh. Bone. Staring eyes in empty faces, empty bodies.

The stump rocks at his touch.

No stump but a chair. A throne of corpses. Blood. Bone. Muscle. Sinew. Love. Hate Desire. Axe. Sword. Cudgel. Shield. At the foot of the throne lies a man, a giant. Armour split, cold now, and still. Golden harp on a field of blue. All gone to red, and no heart beat there.

Circling the bloody wreckage, the soldiers come.

Too late. The giant has fallen. Their king is dead.

Howling, they run the night in a wave.

Wolves run with them, quiet as death.

He stands.

Axe and cudgel; hate and love.

Bare feet planted in the ruin of a King.

The axe swings, arc of silver, as the soldiers pass.

Acceleration, a wrenching shock.

He snarls, wordless pleasure.

He stands, blood washed in foglight, swings again.

A thousand soldiers run the night. An army, routed, fleeing for the shore. All but one.

The nearest, hunting, has marked him.

The Hunter moves; silver gleaming dully, dragon emblem burning above full-moon helmet eyes, a twin to the ring he himself wears.

The Hunter moves; rumble of leather, iron, bone. Feet shake the earth. Braids of hair uncoil, tree branches in high wind. The dragon emblem gleams, amber eye burning, a beacon of intention.

The Hunter moves; shuttered night dressed in firefly silver, tide of axe and dagger flaying skin, leather and steel.

The Hunter howls, and wolves run with him.

His mind is clear: an attack has come from within his own ranks. A betrayal. Raising his axe, he breathes smoke and fire, screams and blood. He swings. A wolf, falling. Teeth, piercing leather and flesh. He swings. Wolf's head, falling, the body a dead weight.

The Hunter, striding closer, feet shaking the ground.

He stands, silent, back to stone, a blood-washed crag. In the smoke bound darkness, a thousand eyes. Wolves, running the night. Their bodies the weight of the world.

He is pressed against the crag, forced to his knees. Blood-stained, canines seek his neck. Howling, he twists, thrusts. A wolf falls, burning silver in one burning eye. Bleeding, he swings again, flesh ragged. Another wolf falls, and the axe with it.

The Hunter (thud) strides (thud) closer.

A wolf jaw clamps home; another, another. Fire, running in his chest, his cheek. He howls. Sinks craggy teeth into matted fur. Saws violently with his trapped sword arm.

Wolves, silent snarl, take better grip.

Blood, black river in the starlight.

The Hunter-

(thud-THUD!)

-strides-

(thud-THUD!)

The Warrior howls-

The Hunter lifts-

-his love-

-his axe-

‘FREYA! MY LOVE!’

The Warrior, betrayed, his voice a summer storm.

‘IN MY WEALTH SHALL NO MAN DELIGHT!’

The Hunter, betrayed, his voice the dying of the earth.

Silver, bright as the sun, bites home.

He falls, a slow cascade; bone, blood and muscle, hate, love and fear; mind draining, a cataract and the water gone to slush, to ice; still now and cold, near empty.

He falls to lie among the litter of battle, the blood, the gore, the shattered flesh and empty faces. Wolves peer, icy curiosity, hot breath beading cold skin. The Hunter, satisfied, calls them away.

He is alone.

(flash)

Not alone.

(flash flash)

Eyes, near empty, track sparks through bloody grass.

Not gold but silver.

Iridescent ripple.

Dragonflies.

Threading the day they come, rainbow darts made blue-silver by the fog. Humming like broken machinery they wait, and their eyes are like the night, a sky full of stars looking into him. A bright storm and him the eye.

(flash flash flash)

Pressure on his hand.

Silver dart on his palm.

Near death, his fingers close.

(FLASH)

The dragonflies are gone, replaced by another vision.

Nine women, beautiful and terrible to see, armoured in leather and stars, steel helms set with amber tears pushing up into the fog.

On black mares they sit, and their eyes are black storms.

They speak then, and their voice the sound of thunder, of breaking rock; elemental pressures, irresistible.

‘Sigrún we;

‘Kára and Skögul;

‘Mist and Geirahöd;

‘Gunnr and Róta and Skuld and Göndul.

‘Wotan our Father; to Freya we belong.

‘The weavers awake! To war we ride!

‘For Wotan! To war!

‘We ride! We ride!’

Above him, horses rearing, hooves poised to smash down, and it seems to his near empty mind that their bodies pass through the day, except the day does not seem to be there any more, just a gigantic plain, trapped under layers of black cloud, a storm, slashed through with lightning, jagged flame that burns in their eyes and faces, and upon the steel of their helms and shields, axes and swords.

And the horses’ hooves fall like hammers, slamming into the ground, all as one, and the sound is the death knell of a world.

The sound does not fade. Instead it grows, gathering and rolling outwards in all directions, becoming the shriek and clash of war, a storm to

end all storms.

The air, hot with the breath of the dying. The ground, slippery with their blood. The plain, a battlefield. The last war.

An army moves there, storm tide of grey and silver. Thousands, tens of thousands, countless more; a living carpet to the deepest valley. Leather and steel and muscle, knotted skulls, wood, matted hair and steaming breath. Love and hate and fevered intention. A stinking, lathered, force of nature, slashing and screaming and fighting and dying.

A storm, drained from the sky, set loose upon the earth.

Huge figures, grey-mossed, charge among the armies. Giant dogs – no, wolves - lunging swift of fang and claw among the fighters, eyes like amber lightning, and in their wake, only blood.

The voice of the dying an unbroken clap of thunder as long as the world was old, stretching back and forward in time from the very beginning to the utter end.

At this trump of death comes vast figures of ice and stone, the very hills made flesh, with forests for hair and rock for armour, striding to war, carving deep gullies through earth and wolves and men alike.

The fighters roar, love and hate, no quarter asked and none given.

He falls, crag-pressed, nails broken and fingers bleeding. He sees a wolf leap into the sky from the hills above the war and it seemed to him that open jaws, running with gore and pieces of men, are big enough to swallow even the sun.

Jaws snap shut, hammer to a god's anvil, and the sound rips up forests, flays the tops from hills, shakes ice from the crowns of distant mountains.

The sky rips apart.

Night in daytime.

Winter in summer.

He screams, voice lost in the storm.

A gulp like the sound of a mudslide, and the sun is gone to the wolf's throat, and night returns to earth and war, and both cry out until each can

cry no more.

Then, into the voiceless dark, comes a sound.

No man's lament this but woman's, a god's; it rises in piercing harmony, a haunting melody that swells to break mind and heart.

And what remains of him, curled into a tiny ball inside his own head, thinks he hears a woman's voice call his name.

His name – or another's?

Trembling, every muscle locked and protesting, he forces his eyes to move. Above him, a face he knows. A face to put the stars themselves to shame, veiled and helmed, riding a black mare, splinters of sunlight on a golden chain at her throat, eyes star-blue and infinitely deep. His sister's face. And yet not.

'Brun-'

Again she speaks his name.

Her voice is starlight, travelling the universe to reach him.

She is a girl made of lacquer, a goddess armoured in steel and starlight. His sister. And yet something more.

'No!'

She leans from the horse and kisses him. At the touch of her lips time stops. All sound falls to silence. Jagged lightning runs the sky, kite-strings of dazzling light. Weapons, stilled pendulums. Mouths open in soundless cries. Filth and sweat and stinking gore, splashed to the four winds, frozen in mid air.

'My love!'

'Not – your – love-'

He tries to look up.

'-not – my – sister-'

'By my choice are we cursed!'

His eyes will not work.

‘I weep for you and pray the earth weep with me!’

‘Brun-’

‘Now STAND!’

‘BRUN!’

But she is gone, and before him stands another, equally striking, swathed in black, face veiled.

‘I am Hel. You are mine now. You will live in my home.’

‘No I won’t! I won’t leave her! I love her! Freya!’

‘The decision is no longer yours to make. She chose you to die. It is her purpose and is necessary to maintain the balance of things. She chose you and none shall weep.’

His scream, full of blood, only rattles softly in his throat.

‘Now you may stand. Our journey beyond the River Gjoll to the Land of the Dead is long. Stand and follow me! I am all that remains for you now.’

Standing, he rails against unbearable truth. But the pain is slow, remote; the sound of broken machinery far away across a distant horizon. Following her, he can easily outpace it.

And so the battlefield recedes, frozen light at the end of a tunnel, but before it vanishes entirely he thinks he sees nine women, beautiful and terrible, mounted upon nine rearing black mares, give voice to shame the storm.

‘FOR WOTAN! TO WAR!’

‘WE RIDE! WE RIDE!’

One of them is a woman he loved.

Already the memory is fading.

(flash)

Later, far across the River Gjoll in the Land of the Dead, a man's fist uncoils. In the palm, a dart of silver.

Not a dragonfly.

A key.

Last gift of love from one swift fading from memory.

'A key is not a tool. A key is intention. A shape cut out of the future.'

Hel, her voice cold starlight.

Love moves there too.

Mind near gone to ice and shadows, he reaches out with the key, tears a hole in the world and, reaching through, finds a moment of warmth. Hands clasp; one, a child's, slender but strong; the other, a man's, harder, blood-gloved and dragon-ringed. Crackling with static electricity, the hands lock. Forces, polarising. Aurora Borealis, circling, endless carousel. A moment hangs between them, that is all. A single moment crackling with energy like the sun.

The moment breaks.

Hel's home is gone.

He stands in a church; broken walls, ruined love.

The child before him framed by an impossible winter.

'Who calls me from death?'

The child speaks and his voice a force to break the world.

'I am Chad, son of Roger, brother to Brun, named for field of battle. You are Baldur, Son of Odin, lover to Freya, forged on field of battle. We are the same. Phrases in a song of change, a war we must settle here and now. I have called you here to fight. Ready your sword!'

Chapter 29

Sky and earth, the living and the dead, old war and new.

Wolves, dream soldiers; dream swords, and the light from them was time-lapsed stars, ancient and merciless, shearing colour from the world, no quarter asked or given.

Chad, running the town, and all darkness in him.

Fighting the light, nova song of change that worked outside and in, choking on here and now, coughing up yesterday's war; snow-duned bodies, cooling, holes in them where the past tore through.

The bodies - people he knew or ancient soldiers?

No way of knowing.

-doesn't - matter - world all - gone if - I can't - stop the-

Sudden movement.

Cold shadows, crawling.

Light, a beating heart inside every duned body.

-what now?-

Snow, rose-blushed and steaming. Gush of water, bile and blood. Apple blossom stink and a heartbreaking melody, cathedral bells or calving glaciers, loud enough to crack the world, wake the dead.

Death stirred in the snow, tumbled bodies, scarecrows uncoiling, reaching out from dripping tombs to grasp and hold and never let go.

Chad, nova-boy, close to melt-down, breath a fog of other days, ran the

High Street and light hunted him.

Light, dead morning, erupting from bodies, hard shafts striking sparks from the night, moon wires, stitching ground to sky, a deadly maze.

Chad, running.

Hands, twisted sticks, frost-black; fingers, icicles, grasping.

-crazy - the dead can't move - can't come back to life - it's-

Jerking corpses twisting upwards, sloughing snow like old skin, bodies split and peeling, filled with other days and the pressure at bursting.

Eyes blank, and faces; so much dead air. Hearts pulsing, broken sunlight, sullen fire in the night. A thousand stars all gone to gravity, the crush bringing one last wave of fire before extinction.

Moon-wire puppets.

They rose, they crawled.

Flame-edged shadows, gulping light.

A thousand mornings, broken on the wheel of night.

Broken, remade; a new configuration. Other days gushed from them, love and hate all gone to war, torrents from drowned ships new raised from the deeps.

Swords and armour, black as pitch.

Flint edged with another's hate.

Legion of night.

They stood.

They ran.

One did not.

She stood before him, a memory dressed in flesh and laughter, face full of summer and eyes bright from love of sharing it. No snow-ghost this but a woman, hot and tangled, real as forest, earth-scented with oil-paint and baking.

‘No!’

His mother.

‘NO!’

His – dead – mother.

‘Chad. Listen to me.’

Her voice. One that lived only in his dreams for half a decade. He choked. His eyes burned from sudden tears.

‘Listen to you? You’re not even real! Just the Symphonion playing tricks, changing things again! You’re not my mother! GET OUT OF MY HEAD!’

‘I am your mother.’

He knew she was.

‘I am real.’

This too.

And in revenge for this betrayal Hel sent an army of the dead to fight with the Ice Giants against the Gods.

His sister’s words. Brun’s magic. Now she slept, gone to shadows and their mother, long dead yet new-risen, called from a dream by the power of her daughter’s words. Called from memory to fight in some future war. Ragnarok. The end of the world. A war that was – impossibly – happening right here and now.

In My Wealth Shall No Man Delight.

She Shall Choose You and None Shall Weep.

‘But you’re dead.’

Chad, prey to the trap and his mother the bait.

‘Do I feel dead?’

Her hand, lifting, sought his cheek. Her skin was warm and dry. She smelt of earth and home.

‘Teethmarks?’

His hand, raised to hers.

Her fingers, tracing his.

‘Long story.’

‘A girl?’

‘A girl.’

‘I’m glad.’

‘You wouldn’t be if you knew her.’

She smiled, an old memory and his heart near broke from it.

‘My little boy is growing up.’

‘Mum!’

A moment.

‘No.’

His voice, a dark current.

‘You don’t feel dead. Not to me.’

His hand, clenching, a slow retreat.

She clenched too, slow muscle shock and blackness flickered there. For

a heartbeat she was embers, slow burn of coal and smoke, then summer came back, too bright, too fierce. Brash strokes on a canvas gone to moss and tinder, light to hide the darkness one last time.

'I can't stay.'

'But you're alive.'

'I am dead. Yet I move. Darkness is in me. The light cannot hold.'

'The darkness. You mean the Symphonion?'

'A dark song, yes. And cold to crack the world.'

'It's taken Brun-'

His voice, a torrent, tumbling madly.

'-she's asleep - turning into shadows - can't wake her up - the clouds - not moving – everyone changing – even me – having dreams – visions – the battle of Clontarf – the end of the world! Who am I – WHO AM I?'

'You are my son, become a man.'

Her voice, thick with a mother's pride and loss.

'A man become god. A god become child.'

'But what does that mean?'

'You know.'

'I don't!'

But he did. The truth burned in him and he burned with it. Nova-boy, near collapse, and all darkness fled.

'It's in me. The song is in me. It's changing me. I don't want to be a warrior, some Norse God from Brun's story. I don't want to be Baldur. I want to be me. I'm just a kid, WHY CAN'T I JUST BE ME!'

'All things change.'

'THEN STOP IT!'

His voice, a child's cry and arms out for mother-love.

‘I am not here to stop it.’

‘Then what?’

But he knew that too. She was here to aid but not to aid him. She brought no escape only understanding. Only change.

‘Alright. So you’re here to help. What can you show me a good library can’t?’

‘There are no libraries.’

Chad, unable to suppress a bark of sarcastic laughter.

‘ “Words as sword.” All very well but no use if you don’t have any words.’

She did not answer, merely led him from the night to a deeper dark. One clothed in stone and half-drowned timber, the stench of salt and the ghost creak of ancient shelves.

The Library, doors tight shut against the world, no defence against the dead.

‘Pick a book.’

‘Which book?’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘How about this one.’

Myths and Legends of The World.

‘This should give us a clue as to what’s what – hey!’

Chad, paper like parchment bone dry against his hands, what he saw mirrored by other books, school notebooks bound in frogs or grinning cats; Brun’s work; empty pages.

‘This is impossible.’

‘You know it’s not.’

Every word was gone.

Chad, human whirlwind, whipped among the shelves and cases, grasping books, flipping pages, hurling them left and right. No knowledge here. No wealth of other worlds.

Every page in every book in every room was blank.

‘Where are the words? WHERE ARE THE WORDS!’

He knew the answer of course.

How many words in a library? Thousands? Millions?

The Symphonion had them all.

More. It had every word. Every word ever written in any language. It had texts and fiction and manuals and poems; cards and recipes and codes. It had histories and theses and doctorates; dictionaries and thesauruses and encyclopaedias. Every word, every number; every scrap of language ever given shape and inked to be read. It had the Bible and the Koran. Dinosaurs and stars. The wavelength of visible light and the chemical properties of common table salt.

No words left.

No stories anywhere.

They were the story now, him and Brun.

Forces polarising and all the world stretched between.

The Library was as much a corpse as the bodies in the snow. He fled from it howling, half animal, crouching to scoop handfuls of snow and hurl them into the air, kicking and screeching, punching snow-choked cars and frost cracked walls, anything he could reach, heart battered ribs, rage and hate and love burning him up from within; nova-boy and the light, hunting, had caught him at last.

He hung from it, crucified, impaled. Holes torn in him and other days pouring through. Standing, fists clenched, every muscle screaming. No room inside for breath or thought. No room for him.

Something moved in the sky.

Shadow ran the cold moon. Black harder than night and eyes like pulsars, mad dervish. A moment of weightlessness, butterfly stomach, then

the shadow was gone, the moon a brash cratered orb, ancient of days, and again he was tide-locked.

Chad, turning, saw tumbled doors and walls, time-blackened spectre of knowledge and before it a woman, his mother, a shape cut from summer.

‘I’m ready.’

‘Then ask.’

‘Why aren’t the clouds moving?’

His mother, smiling, her face proud.

‘The Aesir are gods of the sky and consciousness. If the sky sleeps so too does the mind. When wake the Gods, so wakes the sky.’

‘I don’t – wait, hang on – Baldur. Freya. They were gods. Were they of the Aesir? Are you saying they were asleep? And the Symphonion woke them up?’

Chad, eyes narrowed in thought.

‘Woke them up... in... us?’

His voice, realisation.

Her face, all summer and the world a smile.

‘What do you remember?’

‘Of what?’

‘Your life.’

‘Everything. Our family. Our home. My school. Brun writing. Telly. Football. Dad’s bike, grease-monkey mojo. HM - no – I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to-’

‘Chad, listen to me. What do you remember?’

The world breathing. Summer in, winter out.

‘Tell me.’

Open moorland, crags, a castle.

Axe and sword. Fog and blood.

He stood, feet planted in the ruin of a king.

‘I remember... a war. The Battle of Clontarf. There was a Norseman. A Viking soldier. Baldur. He killed Brian Boru, the Irish King. Was killed himself, betrayed by a friend whose wife he loved. But - that’s not me - that’s-’

‘Your memory plays you false! A trick of the song. His name was Baldur but he did not kill a king. He slew a giant. You’re lost in a mirror maze, the tide of time. He was not Baldur. You are Baldur. Child made man; god made child.’

‘I don’t-’

‘What do you remember!’

‘I DON’T KNOW WHAT YOU MEAN!’

But he did.

He remembered everything.

Knew it all, past and future, with killing intimacy.

The past. Clontarf. An Irish King murdered. A warrior betrayed. These things were false memories, words in a story, sugar for medicine. Mirror image of something he could not remember – until now.

The future. Ragnarok. Giants killing Gods. A wolf that swallowed the sun and the moon. The end of the world. Was the Symphonion giving them new memories or returning old ones? He’d wanted an answer to the question. He had it now and it wasn’t one he liked.

‘ “You are Baldur. Child made man. God made child.” ’

Her words, ringing in his head.

Summer in winter out.

His mother, gulping light.

‘The dark is rising. Soon I’ll be gone. Gone to war and you the enemy.’

‘But-’

‘Hel raised me but you keep me here. The truth of you stands alone against the Song. But you are failing. Turning. The Song is changing you. What do you remember?’

‘That’s it – that’s everything. Clontarf. Ragnarok. The whole shebang.’

Chad, face burning, his words a lie.

He could see by his mother’s face that she knew it.

‘I didn’t raise you a coward.’

Chad, throat a knot, face on fire.

‘I remember being in love. With a woman called Freya. A goddess. Called Freya.’

A moment hung between them, and truth lived there.

‘I remember being Baldur.’

Snow, swirling, carpet of silence.

‘Then my time here is done.’

Shadows, swimming, flooded her.

‘Wait – this change – is it good or bad?’

Her face smiling, last rose of summer.

‘Words as sword. You were right named, I think.’

‘Mum!’

‘I love you-’

‘Mum!’

‘-but I am not the only one.’

‘No Mum please don’t go!’

‘Choose bravely, and remember-’

Her voice, echoing briefly, lost in the snow-duned town.

She was gone.

His face, a crumpled rag.

Tears, cracked ice, glued to his cheeks.

She was gone.

Chad, turning, island caught in a black tide, shadow people, Legion of Dead rising to war, his mother lost to the current and the night.

She was gone.

The town, white void, cold and still. Empty streets like old bones and all life gone from them.

‘Now what?’

Chad, his voice dead and small in the cold silence.

‘NOW WHAT!’

He knew the answer. Find the Symphonion. Switch it off or destroy it. Break the disk. Stop it changing them into something they weren’t. Stop it before the world was gone. Throw the keys into the ocean, never to be found again.

Silence the god-engine forever.

Chad, turning, raised his face to the night. Up there in the blackness it waited. On the Crown, in the ruined church. With Brun and

(a hand, blood-gloved and dragon-ringed, reaching out from a hole in the world to snatch and hold and never let)

Ellyn. Sucking the shape and heat from the world. Singing a new and deadly tomorrow. An end of things. An end of him.

Chad turning. Shoulders square. Hand all fire and the impression of a ring white and bloodless there.

The coast road, jet inked through diamond snow.

Rising into uncertain night.

‘Choose bravely and-’

Chad, walking.

‘-remember-’

Chapter 30

Chad, nova boy, near final collapse. Last star in the night sky all gone to gravity; the crush bringing one last wave of fire before extinction.

The town, grey tide, full to bursting with days to come, a flood and the dam crumbling.

Chad, striding hell, and the weight of him sucked tomorrow from the world where he trod.

Factories, houses, streets, cars; origami x-rays. Fields, rivers, hills; unfolding into a higher strata. Meaning overlaid on meaning until his mind screamed from the weight of it.

Climbing, he reached the watershed.

The dam burst. Vision of understanding.

Chad, shrieking, head open and all tomorrow inside.

The Crown, folded crag, inked in snow and blood, black brow splashed across furnace clouds.

Somewhere up there, an unearthly dawn, breaking.

Lower, the ground writhed. Charcoal army, legion of dead and somewhere in that horde his mother ran with all the rest, black sword and shield and mind flint-edged with another's hate, Hel's hate.

Chad, scrambling upwards, fingers ripped and frozen, muscles screaming.

Closer, and giants strode the earth. No Vikings these, but Gods; the Pantheon of the Aesir, fully debarked from their dream ships, raving across

the world and cracking it. Giant figures all running with starlight, love in them like a storm on the sun. Their standards rose from the bay, eighteen giant flags, Odin's Raven Banners lifting to meet matching towers of anvil cloud. Birds writhed there, flag to sky and sky to flag, snapping and whining, clawing colour from the night. The Gods, running now, and their steps crushing house and car, factory and hospital, gouging craters in shore and road and field. Ellyn's Star-People, and their end upon them, a war they could not win.

Chad, crawling now, ever upwards, head full of light, inescapable truth.

Beyond the Aesir and larger still, the world curved upwards, atmospheric refraction. No, not that. The land really was moving. Mountains erupting from the earth, forests for hair and ice for armour, dressed in hate and all of it looking to the Crown. Warriors of hill and glen, pulling themselves from the ground, snapping roots of ancient magma glowing deep in the earth, striding to war with feet of earthquakes and heads crowned in storms. Stone hearts clapped and the sound was thunder, a world dying, blood like rivers flooding arroyo veins. With lightning for helmets and swords they came and war came with them, the last war the world would know.

Three armies: the land, the living and the dead.

Ragnarok, the utter end, new born upon the earth.

Chad, wriggling, a soldier's belly-crawl and his scream lost now in the voice of war. The Song raved in him, heartbreaking melody like calving glaciers, the end of worlds, unravelling him; nova-boy and the light a call to colours, to take up his sword and fight!

And his axe and FIGHT!

And his hate and

FIGHT!

FIGHT!

FIIIIIIIIIIIIGHT!

Chad, crawling, fingertip slow, pressed his face into the snow. Hissing ice breathed earth-scented steam.

Chad, boiling.

Holes in him and tomorrow tearing through.

Nova-boy and the end was come. No more fight in him to resist the Symphonion's song of change. No ounce of courage or determination he had not already expended a hundred times over.

He whined.

He crawled.

Chad, reaching the summit, turned belly up and flopped, an exultant cry torn from frozen lips, into long grass, frost-made spears.

He lay, eyes burning, and the furnace-sky spread a terrible dawn across him.

Chad, head back, staring through upside down grass at an upside down world, field and hill and stone and flesh like hospital x-rays, overlaid, unfolding.

The ruined church, crumbling silhouette, stone gone to entropy and furnace cloud for mortar.

The Symphonion, tumbling upwards in gothic tiers, running with stars, edges and angles impossibly precise, engine of change and Brun the fuel.

She stood, no girl but a woman, and the the Song breathed her awake and a necklace of buttercups clasped at her throat withered at last to dust.

And more: figures grouped around her in a semicircle. Vincent. Ellyn. Mrs C. The Junkman, Roger and Hjelle Miyake. People he knew. Family. All gone to the Song, bursting with light, running with stars.

'Ellyn-'

His voice, the desert and no rain for years.

Her eyes found him.

'The Star People, Chad. I found them again!'

Surrendering humanity, a sigh of unimaginable pleasure, she joined them.

Six people he knew, all lost to the Song, voices lifting, a chorus to the Symphonion, all the power in the world in that harmony, the last chord the world would ever hear.

Chad, flopping onto his belly, crawled towards the church.

‘-never-’

‘-join us-’

‘-Brun - you’re my sister - come back to-’

‘I love you.’

Her voice, the power of stars, a universe pressed into three words, fuel for the Song.

The Symphonion, bursting with light, a new tomorrow, planes and angles unfolding, an impossible birth, crescendo of sound, incandescent.

Chad, eyes screwed shut, hands clapped tight to face, saw the explosion anyway.

Blasting church, scorching earth and sky.

It burst from the Crown and galaxies paled before it.

Clouds, boiling into vapour, blasted to hail, then rain and steam. The night, running with fire.

The Milky Way, broken river of stars, cataracts pouring from the sky into the Symphonion.

Flame burst there.

Radiance greater than anything before.

Cruciform light, it hung in the air above the Symphonion.

Sunstorm, writhing, shrieking its birth-song.

Sword of fire, sword of words.

Brun’s words, all of them, etched in starlight. These and more. All the libraries lost ran that light and the stars its fuel. Intention, imagination; context and memory; passion and metaphor. Every beginning and every

end. Every subtle nuance of every layered meaning.

The Sword: instrument of Ragnarok.

It burned.

How it burned!

Odur, reaching upwards, face gone to light.

‘IN MY WEALTH SHALL NO MAN DELIGHT!’

Cratered moon and bloated sun, locked in eclipse, ring of fire above the Crown as Odur gripped the sword.

A breath.

A new cadence.

The moon, ancient of days, sundered in a heartbeat, blasted to fragments, powerless before the Song.

Rain of fire, a storm loosed upon the earth.

Burning islands in the war that raved across the world.

Revealed, the bloated sun, shrinking now, gone to black. Gravitational collapse. All night there and no day to come.

Odur, pulling sword from air. Striding towards him.

Chad, unmoving. Impaled on light.

The ground shaking.

Ancient bones deep in the earth.

The Crown, rising, pulling loose from the earth, feet of magma, armour of ice and lightning.

The Last Giant.

Ragnarok had reached them.

‘IN MY WEALTH SHALL NO MAN DELIGHT!’

‘No.’

Chad, struggling to his knees, fought to rise, to stand.

The ground heaved. Only the Symphonion held firm, unmoving, incandescent fulcrum and the world swung around it.

‘I’ve told you before-’

Chad, lurching, strode the Crown even as the Crown itself strode to war.

‘-I’m not – bloody – Baldur-’

The church, mortar gone, stone blocks tumbling.

Somewhere in there a hole in the world and the Ice Man waiting.

Chad, running the church, hands outstretched, groping for something he could never touch.

And there it was.

A hand, blood-gloved and dragon-ringed reaching out from a hole in the world to grasp and hold and never let go.

Electricity ran in him, forces polarising.

Muscles screaming he gripped the hand, a warrior’s clasp, wrist to wrist, maximum strength.

The power, fusing every synapse in his mind.

The pain, unbearable.

‘This – Odur, my old son – is Baldur-’

Chad, pulling, yanked a vision of war from a hole in the world.

He stood, a giant, no man but a God, face hard-cut from granite. Sword. Axe. Love. Hate. All summer in his eyes.

‘WHO CALLS ME FROM DEATH?’

His voice, the crash of hammer on anvil.

‘I am Chad, son of Roger, brother to Brun, named for field of battle.’

Chad, and his voice a force to break this new world.

‘You are Baldur, Son of Odin, lover to Freya, forged on field of battle. We are the same. Phrases in a song of change, a war we must settle here and now. I have called you here to fight. Ready your sword!’

Chapter 31

Two swords, one of flame and words, the other diamond cut from starlight.

Two swords met and Chad, nova-boy, crouched beneath the burning arch.

Odur, running with stars and jealousy-

Baldur, full of love and the dam burst-

They were a storm, loosed upon the world.

Chad, crawling, rocking as the Crown swooped, scooping handfuls of fighters, Gods and corpses, the living and the dead alike, into the air, flinging them to every horizon, scattering Ragnarok to every corner of the dying earth.

The Crown, lurching, granite death; the church, killing blocks, crashing to the ground.

Chad, diving free of the church as the building collapsed, tons of stone tumbling across the heaving crag, shaken free as a warrior would shake blood and splinters from his hair, to fall to the earth, lost in the molten chaos.

Giant figures, fighting in the earth.

Sword and axe, hammer and shield.

Blood and bone and song of war.

Skoll, grizzled wolf, running field of battle, gorged on death but yet unsated, snapping moon-bones like jagged hills from the ground,

swallowing them whole, guzzling from lava fountains, finally hurling itself into the sky where its jaws clamped fast about the dying sun.

The wolf, shaking its head.

Solar flares, gobbets of sun-flesh, dripped from its muzzle.

It howled.

Swallowed.

The sun was gone.

The wolf, black on deeper black, falling to earth, ever hungry.

Chad, lurching from the scattered ruin, through a summer field drowned in snow.

They waited where buttercups once grew, a glowing arc and the Symphonion the focus.

Mrs C. The Junkman. Roger and Hjelle Miyake.

Ellyn. Brun

No. These people were gone, lost to the Song. What he saw were giants, swaying as the Crown strode to war.

Mimir, wisest of the gods.

Hermod, messenger of the gods.

Loki the trickster, and his wife Sygyl.

Hel, guardian of the underworld.

Freya, chooser of the slain.

‘Choose bravely, and remember-’

His Mother’s words but what did they mean?

‘I love you but I am not the only one.’

Chad, swaying.

Behind him, swords rang.

Odur and Baldur, fulfilling a destiny neither could control.

Control.

Control.

How could he take control?

Hel – Ellyn – stepping forward, black hair and eyes the most beautiful night, arm outstretched. In her hand, a silver key.

'Take the key. A token of my love. Use it and the Symphonion will stop. Silence the Song and save the world. Stay with me. I love you.'

Before he could say anything, another movement.

Freya – Brun! – gliding forward, girl of stars and girl of wood overlaid like a mirage, x-ray light. Her arm, outstretched, in her palm a silver key.

'Take the key. A token of my love. Use it and the Symphonion will play forever. Let it sing the end of this land. Return with me to Valhalla and live forever. Stay with me. I love you.'

Chad, head spinning, eyes looping from one to the other.

The world spinning, cracking.

Magma like waterfalls, untethered by gravity.

Behind him a last clash, blade on blade.

A scream. A body, falling to splash snow and rock.

Chad, unmoving. He knew which warrior lay still in final surrender. A roar of triumph from Odur sang the truth of it.

Chad, looking past Freya and Hel, to ones he once thought might help.

'Mrs C-'

She moved closer, her eyes torrents.

'I am Mimir. You must stay in this place else all is lost.'

The Junkman, his face dark night.

'You must leave this place and fight with the Aesir at Ragnarok, else all

will be lost.'

'Dad. HM-'

They ran, shrieking laughter, to war.

Chad, looking from one to another and slow laughter building in him.

'You're all mad.'

But he knew they were not.

The Song was in him now, he felt it. Running his bones and muscles, bridging synapses, scalding mindfire.

'Choose bravely, and remember-'

'- remember-'

Two goddesses, one of light one of dark, and he moved towards them. Hands outstretched, he took a key from each.

'If the choice is truly mine-'

His hands, raised suddenly above his head -

'- if the power is truly mine-'

- closed in a clapping movement.

'- then I choose my sister!'

His hands, bell clappers and the keys rang with a noise that shook the Crown.

Not keys, dragonflies.

Chad, hands open and lightning sprang forth.

Silver darts, they arced unhesitatingly away, jagged bolts of light connecting his hands with two hearts, Freya's and Hel's.

Two screams, fear and loneliness and terrible love.

'I CHOOSE MY SISTER!'

Chad's voice or Baldur's?

Child or man or god?

It no longer mattered.

Turning he saw death. Odur, kneeling, head bowed in homage to a defeated enemy, a dead friend. A flaming sword which, piercing Baldur's chest, fused his body and armour to the Crown.

Chad, taking the sword, drew it from the corpse's chest.

Turned to face the living gods.

They moved from him then, making an avenue for him to approach.

She waited, Hel, goddess of night, and he froze with the sight of her.

'I knew you would choose her.'

Chad, passing Hel, said nothing.

Freya waited, goddess of starfire and he burned with the sight of her.

'I knew you would choose me.'

Chad, passing Freya, said nothing.

It waited, Symphonion, engine of change and he warped at its touch.

Chad, arching, touched the lid.

Closed it.

The Song, a shriek in his head, agony, dazzling.

'I don't choose you.'

Taking the flaming sword he plunged it with all his strength into the music box.

'I choose Brun.'

The Symphonion, shrieking.

'NOW LET ME HAVE HER BACK!'

Chapter 32

Silence.

The Crown, nothing now but dead stone, crashed to the earth and was still.

Magma, bubbling, hissed and cooled.

The earth, gone to silence, and nothing moved there.

Then the wolf, Skoll, looking up from a meal of corpses, leaped atop the craggy scarp.

Jaws open, howling.

Something tore in him then. A visceral need, erupting.

Chad, throwing aside the sword, grasped the slavering jaws, gripped, twisted, wrenched them apart.

The wolf, whining, straining.

Chad, muscles cracking.

Flesh tore.

Bone creaked and split.

Chad, tearing the wolf in half to release the sun and moon, churning tornado of seasons, dead summer and winter to fill the screaming void in the world, his head.

Gravity, entropy, all gone to madness.

Dark and cold.

Silence.

‘I chose Brun!’

His voice, a tiny beat in darkness without measure.

‘Brun did not exist.’

Freya, her voice all summer.

‘Only me.’

His mind, reeling.

‘You did not exist either. No Chad. Just Baldur who thought he was Chad. A man without memory. A god made child in a world made from a child’s imagination. A punishment, now over.’

‘But I feel! I think! I am!’

His words, fading.

‘I... chose.’

‘Does the pupa choose whether to become a dragonfly?’

Ellyn’s words and he could not deny them.

‘The music box will cost you everything you have. All of you.’

The Junkman’s words and the truth of them a fire.

Matter and energy are never destroyed – only transformed.

Chad, his thought the sun.

‘You see the truth of it.’

Her voice, deep and wide as any ocean.

‘Soon you will remember all. A world awaits you.’

‘World? World! There’s nothing here just – nothing!’

‘When you remember you will see. Walk with me. Have patience. Love will show you the path.’

Chad, treading darkness.

Not darkness but fog,

Not fog but dawn, and the light rose petalled summer.

A world brought back to life.

Not the world he remembered.

Smaller, somehow.

Less wild.

And as he walked it seemed to him that the countryside became both flatter and smaller, though the sounds and colours did not change, until soon he seemed to be walking with giant strides across mountains like stepping stones and oceans like puddles, shallow steppes which rose, leading him along a winding path from a sheltered valley, the shallow depression that was the Earth he had known. And it seemed to him then that the world looked less and less like a planet that was part of a universe governed by immutable physical laws, and more and more like a garden that lived in symbiosis with those who tended it. Thinking this he reached the end of the path and, turning, saw that it was indeed a garden that lay before him, richly scented and characterful. And apple blossom lay thick upon the ground like a fine carpet, and fountains rang.

About the garden a storm gathered, a living thing, as if to pounce, but no breath of wind touched root or twig, leaf or bloom. Instead a melody, heartbreakingly pure like distant bells or melting ice, hung upon the fragrant air.

In the centre of the garden was an apple tree. At its roots was a white marble plinth. On the plinth a wooden box, lacquered and jointed, it tumbled upwards in gothic tiers. Winding socket, handle, hinges and

clasps, chased silver, running with light.

The Symphonion.

The lid, open, the portrait within a mirror to the blazing figure beside him. She stood, as she had in his memories, a girl made of a hundred different woods, face alight with love and fear, throat adorned with eighteen amber tears hung upon a necklace of gold, dazzling splinters of sunlight.

He turned.

Girl of wood became woman of light.

The amber necklace did not change.

'The music box is his gift to me. Carved from the wood of Yggdrasil, the world tree, which spans all known space and time. His need has corrupted the tree, weakened the Aesir. The Ice Giants want the power the tree represents. They will attack.'

Something shifted in his mind. He had seen too much of war and violence.

'And the garden?'

She gestured to it. 'This garden is your memory of Earth. While you live, so too it lives. Walk here at any time you wish. Only remember – it is just a garden. Valhalla is your home now. Now that you have remembered who you are.'

He turned at her gesture, saw halls of white upon white rising on all sides, walls bigger than the world, staggering upwards in gothic tiers, marked with columns and balconies and hollowed chambers wherein stood alabaster figures carved from light. No statues these but people, dressed in stars, waiting. His head, tilting, followed the wall until it became the sky. He could see no end.

From within the wall came a sound, a humming and hammering, as of machinery far off across a distant horizon. Voices rang there also, a crowd shouting in a language he now knew. The language of joy and fear, of war to come.

'I had a vision. A war. I died there.'

‘Your destiny. Ragnarok. The utter end of all things and nothing now can stop it. I brought you from the Land of the Dead. There will be a reckoning.’

‘And until then?’

‘We have each other.’

Before him, a stairway of marbled stone swept from the garden to distant heights. Figures gathered there, armoured in bright steel and stars. And it seemed to him their expressions were both beautiful and terrible, infinitely sad.

‘Your family.’

Freya, taking his arm, led him from the garden.

‘Our family. Come. They await us.’

Baldur, treading steps of light, rose to meet them.

Jim Mortimore

Bristol, January 2011